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Harry Potter's Existence after Life.

Loneliness and Regrets

Existence, really, is an imperfect tense that never becomes a present. Nietzsche.

Standing on the walkway between two battlements of a fortress on top of a hill, Harry looked at the flickering lights of an impressive city some three miles away to the west. It was like a huge wedding cake with seven tiers.

The city was called Concordia, which was Latin for Harmony. It was located in what could best be described as a circular island covered by a Magical Hemispherical dome that had a radius of a bit over half a mile on the outside and was twenty times larger on the inside, and that moved around from one secluded place to another every week. The domed island was therefore called Nomad Island.

Nomad Island had the highest concentration of magical beings in the world. Concordia was home to about forty five thousand beings, half of whom were wizards, and that also made it the largest magical settlement in the world.

He lifted his gaze and looked at the night sky as it was projected inside the dome. It was a clear night, and he saw many familiar constellations, for it was the star field of the Northern Hemisphere. The island could be at the bottom of the South Pacific, but the sky would always be the same. From observing Polaris' position, Harry roughly estimated the place where the night sky might look like the projection, and he came up with the Iberian Peninsula, or similar latitude. Astronomy had never been his strong point.

Two years had gone by since he'd defeated Voldemort and left Hogwarts. One of those years he had spent training as an Auror, and the second year he'd been in this place.

"Out here all by yourself, Potter?" a voice asked. "Why aren't you at The Barrel?" The Barrel was the tavern of choice for all off-duty Rangers. And that night, Harry had been officially inaugurated as a Ranger. He now held the rank of Ranger Seventh class.

He looked at the person who was speaking to him. It was a tall and imposing man standing four inches taller than Harry at six feet and three inches, with chiselled features and a full head of silver hair. His eyes were filled with wisdom, yet there was still a hint of the lazy and insolent look he'd had in his youth.

Harry snapped his heels together as he stood in attention, placed his right fist to his chest and bowed. "Commander Ironheart, sir!"

The old man casually returned Harry's salute, minus the bow. "As you were!"

Harry relaxed and eyed the man suspiciously. "What brings you out here, sir?"

"That should be my line, Mr Potter." Ironheart sighed. "Today, you officially became a Ranger. You should be in The Barrel, celebrating with your classmates."

Harry shook his head. "I'm not really in the mood for celebrating sir."

"Aren't you happy?"

"I'm pleased, but not really happy." Harry shrugged helplessly. "Don't get me wrong, I'm very proud to be part of an Order that protects the innocent from threats they can't deal with by themselves. But my reasons for being here aren't quite as noble as you'd like them to be."

"As I'd like them to be? Please elaborate." Ironheart frowned.

Harry shifted his stance uncomfortably. "Well, you know what I did in the late spring of 1998?" Harry swallowed, and his spirits plummeted as he remembered it. Voldemort and his supporters had killed Sirius Black and Hagrid, among others, in a particularly savage attack. Harry and Ron had tracked the attackers down and killed Nott and Macnair...in self-defense. They'd caught up with Lucius Malfoy and interrogated him, but the Death-Eater had smugly pleaded ignorance, confident that Fudge, who was on his payroll, would protect him. Blind with rage, Harry had tortured Malfoy with the Cruciatus curse, and when a horrified Ron tried to stop him, Harry had turned his wand on him before he knew what he was doing. Ron's agonised screams had brought Harry back to reality, but the damage had been done. A month or so later, he'd defeated Voldemort 'the Muggle way', by decapitating him with Godric Gryffindor's sword, but most of the wizarding world, especially the Weasleys, shunned him because of what he'd done to Ron.

"I know all about that." Ironheart nodded gravely. "Go on!"

"Well, as you can imagine, I wasn't everybody's favourite son after that." Harry fought to keep the bitterness from creeping into his tone. His shoulders sagged and his head drooped as he took a deep breath. "But I understand. A Muggle philosopher, Nietzsche, pretty much phrased what happened to me. 'If you gaze too long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.'" His lips formed the thinnest sort of smile after he finished the sentence. There he went, quoting philosophers again. The Dumbledore brothers had probably rubbed off on him that way.

"Yeah? Well Holbrook said, 'Man looks in the abyss, there's nothing staring back at him. At that moment, man finds his character and that is what keeps him out of the abyss,'" Ironheart said quietly. "You saw the abyss, and it changed you, to be sure! But you didn't fall into it, like Tom Riddle did.

"You have to let go of your guilt and forgive yourself. You fought a battle and faced a horrible destiny that was thrust upon you. You may have lost your footing, but you never lost your way! If you had, you

wouldn't be a protector of good right now; rather you'd be bitter and resentful and dabbling in the dark arts to get your revenge."

The old man paced about on the walkway to collect his thoughts. "As my Muggle-born son-in-law would say, ' The wizarding world chewed you up like chewing gum, to remove the foul taste in its mouth and replace it with minty freshness. After they were done with you, they spit you out.'"

"Nice metaphor." Harry smiled ruefully.

"It does mark my point well, eh? But some people still care, like your fellow Rangers. Even though you didn't tell them about this, they know! News travels fast. Some were apprehensive at first, but they all came around," the Canadian Ranger said.

"Why?"

"My dear boy, haven't you heard what I've been telling you? It is what you are doing right now that matters! In our eyes, you have more than made up for the mistakes you've made."

Harry shook his head. "No offence to the Rangers, Commander, but the people who matter to me most hate me, because it was their son and brother I tortured. Without their forgiveness, I can't be complete, and I mean that literally. All my happy memories are somehow connected to them. I can't even produce a Patronus anymore because of that, sir! I've tried very hard, but nothing seems to work."

He managed to hold back a sob and tried to will himself not to shed the tears that were coming, but to no avail. It was as if the universe had decided it had been too long since he'd cried for the last time, and nothing would stop the tears.

Ironheart regarded the tears that were streaming down Harry's face. "I wish I had all the answers, but I don't. I doubt that even Albus would have been able to help you with this one. It's a good thing that you told me about your Patronus though, because I wanted to deploy with the Dementor hunters."

"I'm sorry sir. I let you down," he mumbled miserably. But he couldn't help the fact that he was no longer able to perform the Patronus Charm. As long as the Weasleys and Hermione hated him, he would only be an empty shell. All the happy memories were now tinged with sorrow and guilt over what had done...and what he had become. They could no longer be used to cast the charm.

"No, you didn't let me down, son. You're here and you're a Ranger! Just promise me one thing."

"Anything, sir."

"Never, ever give up! Fight to win back those you hold dear. Deep down they must still care for you...never forget that."

"Then why did they banish me?" Harry sniffed, wiping the tears out of his face.

"They are afraid of you, Harry! You're a very powerful wizard, and in your brief lapse you must have been terrifying indeed, and they are only human," the old Ranger explained. "Now, do you promise?"

"Yes," Harry whispered. "On the graves of Albus Dumbledore, Hagrid, Sirius and all those who gave their lives to defeat Voldemort," he said, a little louder. "You're right, sir! I can't wallow in self-pity anymore. Even if they never forgive me, I will strive to make this world a safer place, so that no child will ever have to experience what I had to go through as a child. That those I hold dear can live their lives in peace, even though I can't be part of it. Maybe I won't know happiness, but at least I'll be content. I can still be that sticky piece of gum under the sole of evil," he added, referring to Ironheart's earlier quote in a forced attempt at humour.

"You are a true Ranger, Harry! I'm proud of you...we all are!" Ironheart said solemnly. "Now...why don't you go and mingle with your classmates? It may be a year before you see some of them again."

"You're right, sir. I'll do that." Harry nodded and forced a happier look onto his face. His heart was still heavy, but at least he had some perspective on things after talking to the commander.

He stared at the retreating form. Commander Ironheart had reached out to him just now. Several others had tried to do the same thing over the course of the training, but Harry had chosen to keep them all at arm's length. At the time he'd felt like he'd done the right thing, but in retrospect it was probably a good idea to be well acquainted with those upon whose lives you would depend at some point.

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## Chapter 2

### Meet the people

Harry took a portal from the Ranger Citadel to the portal nearest to The Barrel in Concordia. Apparition into and within Nomad Island was not possible, so these portals were sorely needed for the wizards who were in too much of a hurry to take their brooms. An added benefit of these portals was that dwarves, goblins and elves could also make use of them. The elves could actually still zap from place to place, though many important buildings where access was restricted had barriers in place that could repel even Elven Magic and thus could keep elves from zapping in. On those occasions, the elves used the portals. These portals were exactly like the Floo network, except for the fact that no fire and powder were required, just the destination spoken out loud.

Harry exited a portal on a large avenue that was paved with smooth stone slabs that fitted together neatly. He walked a little further along a smaller, cobbled road and entered an alley that was covered by many balconies and overpasses that connected some of the buildings with each other. The Barrel looked like a dive from the outside, though Harry knew that it was a nice place with decent patrons, like most taverns in the city. There were very few troublemakers in the Concordia, and it was usually visiting wizards and goblins that caused what little trouble there was. There was virtually no crime, and the City Watch had a relatively easy time keeping the peace.

The people of the Office of Traffic into and out of Nomad Island were very good at their jobs. Everyone, who wanted to visit N.I., have had to give notice to their Department of International Magical Cooperation six months in advance. One year, if the being in question wished to live and work in Nomad Island for any length of time. This attitude kept many troublemakers from ever entering N.I., because people with bad records and suspected use of dark magic were turned away.

Harry pushed the wooden door open and entered the dimly lit tavern. The sound of many people chattering welcomed him, and few people took notice as he entered, for he had changed out of his uniform and

was now wearing clothes in the local fashion. He made his way to the bar to say hello to Holly. She was a House-elf, or just plain elf, as they were called in N.I. For they were all free and received payment for their services. They still loved waiting on and serving wizards, and they still had an excellent work ethic, but they also had a self-respect that few elves outside the city had.

"Hello, Mr Harry Potter sir, or should Holly say Ranger Potter?" the elf's high-pitched voice squeaked.

"You can always call me Harry," he smiled.

"Oh no sir, Holly isn't wanting to! It would be disrespectful."

"But I call you Holly!"

"That being different. Holly is elf!"

"And what an elf!" a melodious female voice said.

"Hello, Vesta." Harry greeted the barmaid in the black low-cut blouse and the green bodice that amplified her already considerable charms. She was one-eighth Veela, and still very attractive, though she didn't have any Veela magic in her, like women with more Veela blood had. She was also the youngest daughter of the ageing Lieutenant Janos Gaal, a Hungarian Ranger Third Class, who had come out of retirement to mitigate the attrition the Rangers had suffered during the war against Voldemort's supporters. "Is your old man here?"

"No!" She laughed. "Mother was mad enough as it is because he went back into service! She insists on him coming home straight after work. My mother may only be quarter Veela, but things can still get very ugly when she gets angry. Oh, and all your drinks tonight are paid for by Ranger Command!"

"Goody," Harry mumbled sarcastically "Have one on Ranger Command, then!"

Vesta placed two small glasses on the bar and poured them full of Odgen's Best. "Hmmm, other Rangers rarely turn down free drinks."



"I'm not like other Rangers."

"I don't like the sound of that. What's on your mind, Harry?"

"I really don't want to talk about it," Harry snapped, and immediately regretted his tone of voice as he saw that her cheerful smile faltered. "Sorry. I appreciate your concern, but I really don't want to talk about it."

"Will to talk to someone about it?" she asked.

Harry shrugged. "At some point."

Vesta mimicked his shrug and facial expression, and a chuckle managed to escape Harry's throat. Now he knew why many Rangers, particularly male Rangers, came to her when they were feeling down. She'd even managed to lift his spirits a notch.

"Bottoms up!"

Harry downed the whisky and allowed it to warm his insides. "Nice, but from now on, I'll only have non-alcoholic beverages," he said, knowing that while Vesta could out-drink any being in the city, he would be tipsy after no more than five or six glasses of mead. The whisky he'd just drunk probably counted as three glasses of mead, so he decided not to have any more.

A tall and burly man beckoned him to come over. He was sitting at a long table, with ten other Rangers, some in uniform, but most wearing the medieval clothes the city natives wore. He scooted away from the corner and more to the center to make room for Harry.

"Harry, the bloke we've been looking for!" another classmate of Harry's said. He was the brother of the one who had called Harry over. Nathaniel and Matthew Kelly, Matt and Nathan for short, were fraternal twins. They were so unlike one another that Harry found it hard to believe that they were even related. Matt was six feet and six inches tall with yellow eyes like Madam Hooch's, and blond hair tied back in a messy ponytail. He was broad-shouldered, but his build was

lean, like a swimmer's. Nathan was even taller at six feet and eight inches, and huge. He had musculature that suggested that he spent more time improving it than he did sleeping, and his face looked like it had been clobbered by trolls one time too many. But the violet eyes beneath his thatch of brown hair shone with intelligence. Their personalities were also different. Matt loved swimming and surfing, while Nathan hated water. Nathan was often quiet, cautious and introspective, with the occasional emotional outburst. Matt, on the other hand, was charming, flirtatious and extroverted. But they had one thing in common...Quidditch...even though Matt was a Thunderers' fan and Nathan a Warriors' fan, and the rivalry between these two Australian Quidditch teams was legendary. "Harry, mate, Nathan and I are trying to recruit enough players for a team, so we can play a friendly match against some locals tomorrow, before we head out to our respective assignments!"

"Who've you got so far?"

Matt pointed at the short witch from the Philippines. "Lilia is willing, and Thubo, too."

Harry looked at Lilia Rosaria who was in deep conversation with another female classmate of his, the Brazilian Clara Da Silva. The chubby Lilia was a trained field-mediwitch with a terrible bedside manner. She had a volatile temper and would just as soon hex an uncooperative patient as soothe him. She kept her black hair as short as her temper, and her eyes could go from kindly to menacing in a blink! Harry knew she used to play Chaser on her school team in Australia, and she'd been competent enough when he saw her play a couple of months ago.

Clara was a darker-skinned version of Aunt Petunia, but her cheerful nature and sense of humour made up for it. She was an excellent strategist and tactician, and Harry didn't doubt that she would be coordinating many Ranger actions in the future.

Thubo Sibaya, the South African, also played Chaser. Harry had seen him in action on a well-kept Nimbus Two Thousand, and he wondered why Thubo hadn't gone pro. Thubo was skilled in dealing

with many undead creatures, like zombies, vampires and mummies. He was also a tracker and had participated in a Nundu hunt twice!

Harry looked at Matt. "So that gives us two Chasers, you're the Keeper, Nathan's a Beater and I'm the Seeker...We're still two players short."

"I am well aware of that, junior. I'm working on it." Matt grinned. They called Harry junior, because all his classmates, with the exception of the Austrian woman, Heidi Gravenstein, were two to three years older than he was. Heidi was exactly one year older than he was, and they would both have their birthdays in two days.

While Matt got up to ask around if anybody else felt like playing Quidditch, Harry looked at his table and then around the room. Alain Moreau, an aristocratic Frenchman Harry remembered from the Triwizard Tournament, was chatting idly with Heidi Gravenstein, who caught Harry staring at them and winked.

Harry blushed. Heidi...another thing that would haunt him forever. He'd had sex with her several times a couple of months ago, but now he knew that he didn't have any feelings for her, and he felt guilty for taking advantage of her. He knew the only reason that she'd caught his eye in the first place was because she looked like Ginny. She was a bit taller, her hair was a darker shade of red, and her skin had fewer freckles, but the resemblance was still uncanny, with the same bright brown eyes. He'd come clean and explained everything to her...How he loved Ginny but had never had the chance to tell her, first for fear of reprisal from Voldemort, and later because the Weasleys wouldn't speak to him anymore. And Heidi, bless her heart, had forgiven him. She hadn't given up on him, and was still trying to entice Harry into seeing her from time to time, but Harry simply wasn't interested. He'd felt empty after all their intimate moments and he deep in his gut knew he would never have much of a future with anyone but Ginny.

Harry's gaze went over to Carlos Montalban, from Panama and Cirilo Roverano, the Peruvian Ranger, who was nodding at Matt. It looked like they'd found the second Beater. Then his eyes left the table he and his classmates were sitting at and went toward the booths against the wall.

Captain Faust, a round-faced German Ranger Second Class with a handlebar moustache, was talking to Caleb Mordecai, an Israeli Ranger Fourth Class magical weapons specialist. Also sharing their booth was the Jamaican Lieutenant Janice Cliff, Ranger Third Class, a witch blessed with a good inner eye. She never left the base for field operations, and as such had allowed her physique to slack. Matt and Nathan were constantly cracking jokes about her size.

In another booth, a female Ranger reached over to grab the hand of a male Ranger, who pulled his hand back as if it had been burned, a panicked look on his face. The female pulled her own hand back, looking dejected, and the male squirmed in his seat, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

Harry knew their story as well. Girl meets messed up boy and feels an urge to fix him, falling in love with him while she works on him...Only, the boy's issues run very deep and can't be easily fixed. He didn't really understand Max Wolfe's reluctance to get close, because Galatea Angelou was definitely a beauty with her waist length white hair framing delicate features and large, deer-like lapis lazuli eyes.

Matt walked over to their booth, oblivious to what had happened, and started talking to Wolfe, pointing at the booth where a Native North American wizard and a Native South American wizard were sitting. They both were animagi. Chayton Blackmoon could turn into a nineteen inch long prairie falcon, and Takupai Orzaiz transformed into a fourteen-foot anaconda.

Wolfe gave a small nod after hearing Matt's story, and the beaming Australian walked back towards their table and plopped down next to Harry. "We've got a team! I wonder if Wolfe's as good as Blackmoon says he is!"

"Wolfe will be playing with us?" Harry asked incredulously. The dour Ranger had never struck him as a team player, but then again he didn't really know him that well. Apparently, Blackmoon did. "I didn't know he played."

"According to Blackmoon, Wolfe was a very good Chaser at the Salem's Wizards Academy. He left before Wolfe attended, but apparently his youngest brother was in the same year as Wolfe and couldn't stop talking about how good a Chaser Wolfe was."

"Well, if he is even half as good at playing Quidditch as he is at his duties as a Ranger, I am looking forward to playing with him," Thubo Sibaya, turning away from his conversation with a small and deceptively sweet-looking Japanese witch, remarked.

The witch, a Ranger Sixth Class called Mayumi Sakai, gazed over at Wolfe with a lovesick look in her eyes. "Hmm, if his skills are as good as his looks..." Galatea caught her staring, and her eyes were shooting daggers at the Japanese witch.

Harry shook his head. He couldn't really understand why, but Max Wolfe seemed to be the object of many a witch's affections. Sure, the Ranger Fifth Class was handsome, with dark brown hair and eyes and a tanned complexion and straight, symmetrical features. He'd once heard Noelani Winters, a female Ranger Fourth Class from Hawaii, comment on Wolfe's physique, saying that one could probably bounce a quarter off Wolfe's behind...Whatever that meant. But by the way the witches around her had been giggling and blushing, Harry had assumed that it had been a positive remark.

"I don't get it. Okay, he's a handsome fellow, but the look in his eyes, doesn't that give you the creeps?" Harry frowned at Mayumi.

"That only makes him more attractive," Mayumi grinned.

"Oh please, I think I'm going to throw up!" Matt moaned.

"Jealous, little brother?" Nathan's ugly face split in a toothy grin.

"Shut up, at least I get more action than you," the younger brother retorted.

Nathan shrugged. "It isn't the quantity, mate!" He looked at the little Japanese witch. "I feel like having a little sparring practice. You up for it?"

"Didn't get enough last time?" she smiled sweetly, creating dimples on her cheeks that made her 'insufferably cute', according to a few jealous witches.

Harry chuckled. Mayumi was four feet and eleven and a half inches tall, and built like a gymnast, but she could throw anyone in the room, save Wolfe, around like a rag-doll. "Yeah, Nathan. Weren't you embarrassed enough last time?"

Nathan shook his head. "Why d'you think I've been training with Wolfe all week? He's been teaching me how to become faster, said my lack of speed was a huge flaw."

Lilia Rosaria jumped into the conversation. "You've been training with Wolfe? So that's why I had to patch you up last night and the three nights before that!"

"You should train with us sometime, Harry! You showed promise in basic training. You should spend more time practising hand-to-hand," Nathan said.

"No thanks," Harry laughed. "I'm having enough trouble finding dates as it is. If you and Wolfe rearrange my face it'll be even harder."

A diabolical grin appeared on Matt's face. "Why don't you try Heidi?" he teased, and Harry flushed red.

Lilia, Thubo, Mayumi and Nathan laughed.

"Matter of principle," Harry huffed, and gave them a 'I don't want to talk about it' look.

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The following morning they met on one of the three Quidditch pitches in the recreation zone on the second tier of the western quadrant.

The opposition was one of the six local teams who vied for the local title every year. They were the previous season's champions, and on

average their brooms were better than the Rangers' were. Their Keeper flew on a Relampago Three, which had performance comparable to a Nimbus Two Thousand and One. The Beaters flew on Cleansweep Eight's, that were about as fast and manoeuvrable as the Nimbus Two Thousand, but with better acceleration. Two of their Chasers had Nimbus Two Thousand and One's, and the third had the newest Cleansweep Nine, that was slightly faster than the Nimbus Two Thousand and One, though not as fast as the Firebolt, and well suited for executing Wronski Feints because it could pull out of dives really well. Their Seeker had a Firebolt, like Harry.

On the Ranger team, Matt and Nathan had Cleansweep Seven's, Thubo carried his clearly lovingly-maintained Nimbus Two Thousand, and Lilia had a Cleansweep Eight. Cirilo Roverano, the second Beater, rode a Murcielago Three-Fifty, which was about as good as the Nimbus Two Thousand. Harry had his Firebolt, the two teams had equal chance in that respect, and Wolfe unveiled a Nimbus Two Thousand Five Hundred, equal to the Firebolt in top speed, but more nimble and with better acceleration. Harry knew there was a better broom on the market, namely the Firebolt Mk II, but the Wolfe's broom was the best on the pitch.

They played five games, and only Harry's quick capture of the Snitch allowed them to win the first three games. The Rangers had been at a distinct disadvantage because they had never played together. The scores had been ninety to one hundred and sixty, one hundred to one hundred and eighty and one hundred to one hundred and seventy, and since the games ended relatively quickly due to Harry's clear superiority over the other Seeker, it was decided that they would continue to play for a while.

In the break between the third and fourth game, Wolfe called Thubo and Lilia to him and discussed some strategy, and in the fourth game they scored nine times, five of which were Wolfe's. He turned out to be even better than Thubo, though Harry didn't want to judge on that just yet because Wolfe had a better broom. The defence had also improved, and the opposition scored only eight times, an all-time low. The game ended eighty to two hundred and forty.

In the fifth game, when the score was thirty to seventy in the Rangers' favour, a vicious Bludger sent by Nathan, caught the opposing Seeker off guard, and injured him pretty seriously. The locals forfeited the match, because there was no way they could win without a Seeker.

Cursing violently and telling the Seeker to lie still, Lilia fixed him up a bit and told him to go to the House of Healers for a more thorough examination.

"Good game, Harry," said Heidi, who had been watching in the stands. She bounded towards him and threw her arms over his shoulders, kissing him on the lips.

"Why? I didn't catch the Snitch," he mumbled, blushing profusely as he disentangled himself from her grasp.

"I meant the four other games, silly," she giggled.

Harry felt like telling her off for her behaviour, but he decided that it might harm their friendship if he did so in front of everybody else. Instead, he looked at Wolfe, who had a half-panicky, half-bewildered look on his face as Galatea fussed over a cut on his forehead caused by a Bludger graze. He flinched every time she reached out with her gloved finger to probe the area around the wound. Even though it was a beautiful day, she was completely covered up, because she had very little pigment, and the artificial projection of the sun burned like the real thing. When Galatea looked away to dig in her bag to find her wand, Wolfe took the chance to jump on his broom and flee the scene.

Shaking his head, Harry walked over to the opposing team to praise them for a game well played. Wolfe really was an enigma...and Harry suddenly pictured the haunted look Wolfe so often wore in his mind's eye. It was a look that Harry knew well from the mirror.

Nathan came over and clapped him on the shoulder. "Mate, if it weren't for you, we'd have lost the first three games. You were brilliant."



"It was a team effort." Harry shrugged. "Wolfe is really good!"

Cirilo, who came over to collect Nathan's Beater club, nodded. "Yes, he is a very good flyer. I didn't even notice the instability of his Nimbus Two Thousand Five Hundred."

Harry nodded. The Nimbus Two Thousand Five Hundred was a great broom, but it was a bit unstable compared other top of the line brooms. Seekers, Beaters and Keepers, who sometimes had to take both hands off their broom, therefore seldom used it. It was definitely not a broom for novice flyers or flyers with only average skill. "Yeah, he handled it well." He glanced at the sky. "I'm going to fly around a little, I'll be back in time for the assignment of our new duties." He hopped on his Firebolt and accelerated cloud-wards with blistering speed.

He levelled out at an altitude of roughly two thousand one hundred feet, three hundred feet above the regular air traffic lanes of the city. Below him, other brooms, carpets, magical chariots drawn by winged horses and people mounted on Hippogriffs cruised around. He saw the wizards and golems from the office of Magical transportation, on four floating platforms, each in one quadrant of the city, searching the skies for reckless flyers or beings who might be experiencing trouble on with their means of flight. Below that, he saw tiny figures in colourful medieval clothes strolling along the avenues and across a broad plaza decorated by a number of giant statues. It was the Artists Square.

In front of him he saw the great lake that nearly encompassed the full western quadrant of the island, except for the space the city occupied. So its surface spanned over seventy-seven thousand acres, and its water supplied the city and the crop fields and orchards in the southern quadrant, which was to his left. The forest sector or northern quadrant, to his right, housed three family groups of centaurs, ninety-seven centaurs in total, as well as many magical and regular creatures.

Behind him, he knew, were the hills where Graphorns and Re'ems roamed, and the Ranger Citadel was located, sitting on top of a hollow hill that housed the rest of the base. The highest hill, or rather,

a low mountain at one thousand six hundred feet, housed four Phoenixes.

Harry rose even higher and saw what he actually came to see. Resting in a nest of fluffy clouds above the lake in the western quadrant, at an altitude of roughly three thousand feet, hovered a bowl-shaped construction on top of which stood a beautiful palace surrounded by orchards and flowerbeds. It was the Palace of the Winds and was inhabited by three Veela. They were the last of a group of twenty-one Veela who had settled in the city some three hundred years ago. One by one, they'd married mortal wizards and borne their offspring, thus losing their immortality. After that they would start ageing like humans do, yet very gracefully. They'd been the ancestors of the many wizards with Veela blood who'd inhabited Concordia, including Vesta and her mother Sophia.

Knowing that the Veela weren't fond of unexpected visitors, Harry looped around while he was still well away of the Veela sanctuary and headed back to the Citadel of Illumination, better known as the Ranger Citadel.

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## Chapter 3

### Sacrifices and Epiphanies

It was late August, and the now twenty year-old Harry was settling into the routine of his new and dangerous lifestyle. In his first month on duty he'd been deployed with Wolfe, Mordecai and Okan Izzet, a Turkish Ranger Fourth class, and he'd spent three weeks tracking down and destroying some particularly troublesome Chimeras on the Greek islands. The Greek Ministry had asked the International Confederation of Wizards for help because they were too ill-equipped to deal with the problem thoroughly, and their spin-doctors had been working overtime to cover up Muggle disappearances. The International Confederation of Wizards had in turn contacted the Order of Illumination, who'd dispatched Harry's team to deal with the problem.

Harry had had his fare share of dangerous situations in the past, but he'd still found the experience strangely exhilarating. Maybe it was because this time, he'd gone out looking for trouble, while in the past, it had always been trouble that found him!

After the Greek mission, they'd travelled to India where they'd joined up with another team that specialised in covert operations and intelligence gathering. They had uncovered a plot hatched by a five hundred year-old vampire to take over the Indian Ministry of Magic, and by extension, Muggle India. The plot involved many corrupt Ministry officials, and according to the Intel team, slightly more than half of the Ministry officials would remain in office if they were to remove all the bad seeds. They'd decided that the best course of action would be to eliminate the vampire, and the more intelligent of his minions, leaving the lesser evildoers to the Indian ministry.

Now, Harry and seven other Rangers were creeping through the tunnels of an underground lair, somewhere near one of the many rural villages, served as the food supply for these vampires.

Peering through his Magical Vision Enhancement Goggles, Harry saw a greenish image of the cave walls, and the silhouette of the two Rangers in front of him.

A Dutch Ranger Fifth Class took point because he was a trained curse breaker and could disarm many conventional and magical booby-traps. His goggles were tuned to detect magical objects. Mordecai was behind him, carrying a heavy magical crossbow with darts that had hollow tips loaded with Erumpment fluid, which caused anything it was infused into to explode. It was an excellent weapon against vampires because one didn't have to aim for the heart with these special darts. As long as the fluid went into the target, a kill was guaranteed.

Normally, a hive of vampires was no match for eight highly skilled wizards, but these vampires had allied themselves with wizards, and the Intel team had picked up faint traces of magic in the form of magic detectors. That's why the Rangers were using magical artefacts with very low magical signatures, rather than their wands. They were also wearing special amulets that emitted a modified Confundus Charm that baffled the most advanced magical detectors. The amulets were charmed not to interfere with the Rangers' equipment, of course.

They halted and crouched down, waiting, as Dagobert Wortelgraaf used his magical tools to disable a Curse Capsule. Highly illegal in the conventional wizarding world, these capsules could store and amplify a host of hexes and curses, and the most common spells used were for stunning and killing. The fact that Wortelgraaf found such an artefact meant that the conspiracy ran deep into the Indian Ministry, deeper than the Intelligence people had suspected, for only trusted Magical Law Enforcement and Department of Mysteries officials had access to such artefacts.

Wortelgraaf removed the curse, a killing curse, from the small orb with a special curse extractor, that worked a lot like a put-outer, and placed it in a pouch so he could use it against the enemy should the need arise. Harry wondered how brightly the Lumos Solem spell would shine if the capsule amplified it.

Silently, they crept on, using all they knew about silent movement, allowing their bodyweight to be carried by flexed knees, using all their joints in movement to move fluidly, breathing along with their movement to avoid tension and stopping to listen from time to time.

Harry hoped that there weren't any vampires nearby, for they had keen senses of hearing, smell and sight. If they encountered one, it was Mordecai's job to take it out with the crossbow since using wands would give them away. The last thing they wanted was to fight the complete horde of the enemy at once. They were too few Rangers for them to win like that. They had to surprise their foes at their nerve-centre and work outwards from there.

The first real problem arose when they reached an intersection. They could now go three ways. Wolfe, Izzet and Mordecai positioned themselves at the entrances of the three tunnels, to intercept anyone coming through them quickly, quietly and efficiently. The rest conferred in hushed tones what the next course of action should be.

Harry wasn't included in the discussion, because he was the most junior in rank. As he crouched down to guard the rear of the intrusion party, he noticed a pit viper. A plan rapidly formed in his mind. "Hello there! Do you live in here?"

The snake looked surprised. "A human that can speak my tongue?"

"Yes, I can speak your tongue. Tell me, which of those three tunnels up ahead could we best take, if we wanted to sneak up on the undead who dwell in these tunnels?"

"Are you here to destroy them?"

"Yes we are," Harry said. He didn't know whose side the snake was on, but he knew that snakes always reacted favourably to Parselmouths, unless they were loyal to another Parselmouth.

"Their slaves hunted and killed my children for mere sport. Their presence is an infection to the balance of things around here. You are here to destroy them, and I will help you, if you let me," the snake hissed.

"What are you doing Potter?" Lieutenant Aminata Diatta, the team leader, asked as Harry conversed with the snake.

"Recruiting allies, Ma'am. This viper has a personal grudge against vampire ghouls and is willing to show us the way."

Diatta smiled. "I forgot you were a Parselmouth. Which tunnel should we take?"

Harry proceeded to find out everything he could about the layout of the tunnels, the snake's best guess as to the number of enemies, and how many were alive and how many were undead. The snake also mentioned that there were three individuals in a closed chamber, who seemed to be held there against their will.

They took the tunnel straight ahead of them, and the snake warned Harry about the strange objects that littered the floor. About half of them were booby traps and the detection objects, which were rendered useless by the special amulets the Rangers wore. Other things turned out to be harmless litter. But they examined each of them anyway, because they might have been non-magical booby-traps.

Progress was slow, but the Rangers were keen on retaining the element of surprise, so they didn't mind. The Rangers finally came upon the chamber where the supposed prisoners were held. It wasn't protected by any spells, but a highly specialised key was needed to open the lock. Harry knew that the odds of running into an enemy were increasing, and that they didn't have enough time to discuss how to open the door.

Diatta made the decision. "All right, Ivanova and Gedeon will stay here. After the fighting starts, I will send a signal through the wireless connection, so you had better put in your ear-pieces. Stealth will no longer be an issue then, so you can use magic to open this door." She looked at the two witches. "You have to get the prisoners out of here. Go back the way we came. We will probably follow, but if things don't go as planned we will find our own way out."

Ivanova and Gedeon nodded grimly. Evgenia Ivanova was a Russian Ranger Fifth class with mediwizard training. She was their party's medic. The Haitian Ranger Fourth class, Patience Gedeon, was a

trained warrior, like Wolfe, Harry and Mordecai, and her duty was to protect Evgenia and the prisoners on the way out.

Izzet and Wortelgraaf continued in with the rest of them, and everybody now drew his wand. They could hear noise coming from a large cavern where the unmistakable sound of vampire ghouls could be heard. And where there were ghouls, there were at least a few vampires to control them.

The Dutch Ranger grinned at Harry as he dug into his pouch and extracted a dozen Curse Capsules, now devoid of their previous curses.

Harry doubted that the enemy would appreciate the irony of having their own weapons used against them. But he was delighted by the extra ammunition, as were his fellow Rangers.

"Two each, one Lumos Solem and one Stunner," Diatta ordered. There may be more prisoners in there, and we don't want them to die do we? On my mark, charm the capsules...three, two, one, mark!"

The six Rangers uttered spells, first charging one capsule, then the other. The reaction in the chamber around the corner was immediate, and sounds of alarm were emanating from many throats. The magic detectors were probably going haywire.

Diatta ordered Wolfe to take the lead, only to find out that he was way ahead of her. He rounded the corner, threw his two capsules into the chamber and jumped back behind the wall to shield himself from the detonation.

Harry heard many bodies fall on the floor unconscious, and he distinctly recognised the shrieks of vampires in agony due to the burst of magical sunlight. Then, after getting a signal from Wolfe, Diatta lead her team charging into the chamber.

Harry had never been in a fight like this before. A vampire tried to get the drop on him but a wooden stake caught it in the heart while it was in mid air, and the vampire dropped to the floor, decomposing at an accelerated pace. He didn't have the time to see who had saved him,

because soon another charred vampire bounded towards him. Harry muttered a spell, and a wooden stake shot out of the tip of his wand and pierced the heart of the vampire. Seconds later, from the corner of his eye, he saw a wizard, aiming his wand at Diatta. He shot a stunner from the hip that sent the wizard flying at least twenty feet. Harry had put the extra power into his spell because he didn't know whether the wizard came into the room after Wolfe had thrown the grenade, or if the wizard had resisted the effects of the grenade somehow. If the latter were the case, the overkill on his charm had been a good idea. The wizard was completely unconscious.

A vampire, who had been trying to stay out of the fight, saw his former ally being stunned and rushed over to the fallen wizard. Harry knew there was no compassion behind the gesture. The vampire intended to silence the wizard for good, lest his debriefing endanger the conspiracy's secrets. So Harry first emitted a blast of the solar version of the Lumos spell, Lumos Solem, because the vampire was moving too quickly to be targeted by a stake. The vampire's skin started blackening and smoking, but it didn't slow down, intent on killing the unconscious wizard. But before it could kill the wizard, an arrow plunged into its belly. The vampire looked at it stupidly for a few seconds, before suddenly it started expanding like a balloon, and exploded.

Harry gave thumbs up to Mordecai, who returned a cocky smile and slung the crossbow over his shoulder.

Most of the enemies had been defeated by now, since the ghouls hadn't put up much of a fight after their masters had been slain, and Harry could afford the luxury of looking around.

Wolfe was fighting the last enemy in the room, a really big and fearsome-looking vampire. It was armed with a sword, and Wolfe had drawn his own sword that he carried slung over his back. The vampire attacked with blinding speed. The Ranger feigned a stumble and dropped to the ground avoiding the slashing attack that would have decapitated him, pivoting on his left arm and sweeping the vampire's legs out from under it. The vampire dropped to the ground, and Wolfe brought down his sword on its throat quickly, yet with seemingly casual nonchalance, decapitating the creature.



"Verdorie, je laat het zo gemakkelijk lijken," Wortelgraaf grinned at Wolfe.

Wolfe smiled grimly. "I know I make it look easy, but we're not through yet."

Harry hadn't known that Wolfe spoke, or at least understood Dutch. He absently wondered how many people did know. From Wolfe's answer, Harry deduced that Wortelgraaf said something about the way Wolfe killed the vampire. He looked at the dour wizard and saw the brooding stare was temporarily replaced by a focussed expression. Mordecai and Wortelgraaf then started destroying all the magical artefacts thoroughly yet methodically, sparing the things that could be used as evidence by the honest Ministry officials who would no doubt be very pleased with them. Then he looked at the team leader for instructions.

Diatta seemed to be listening to her earpiece, and she looked worried. "Gedeon says they are pinned down in the prison chambers. Potter, Wolfe, help them. We'll take care of anything else that might be lurking in here."

Harry followed Wolfe as they raced through the caves. They reached the prison chambers a few minutes later and found a bunch of ghouls and a couple of vampires trying to get into the cell.

"Potter, use the capsules," Wolfe said.

Harry threw the two capsules into the crowd of ghouls, and they immediately went limp after the detonation. Two vampires shrieked and smouldered. A third one seemed unaffected by the burst of magical sunlight.

This vampire looked at the two Rangers with contempt on its features.

Wolfe obviously knew the vampire and snarled, "Skaras!"

Harry shot a stake out of the tip of his wand, but the vampire turned into mist and the stake went straight through it.

Reacting quickly, Wolfe shot a strong wind spell out of his wand and twirled it into a vortex, trapping the misty form and forcing it away from the door to the cell. Ivanova and Gedeon ushered a few frightened people out.

Wolfe spoke into his broadcaster. "Hannibal Skaras is here, and he's blocking the exit." He turned to Harry. "Potter, go with them. You need that snake of yours to guide the way."

Harry looked at the viper that was still twirled around his arm. He had totally forgotten about it. "But what about you? You can't face Skaras alone!" he said. He knew Skaras by reputation only, and he knew that it was the oldest known vampire in existence, with awesome powers.

"I have to delay him, or nobody gets out!" Wolfe said. "Now go, that's an order!"

Harry looked pleadingly at Patience Gedeon because she outranked Wolfe and could overrule him. She seemed to read his thoughts and shook her head. "He is right. We have to go!"

Patience led one of the prisoners over to Harry. She was very weak and needed Harry's support as they walked. "Harry Potter?"

He looked into her face that would have been pretty under different circumstances. It was now gaunt and pale looking, and her long black hair was dirty, but he recognised her anyway and his mind suddenly made the connection. It had to be Padma Patil. She had gone to India five months ago as an overseas correspondent for the Daily Prophet. She'd disappeared without a trace a month after her arrival. He knew this because a pair of Rangers had been dispatched to find her. It was among the reasons why they had stumbled onto this whole conspiracy.

"Don't worry Padma, I'll get you out of here!" Harry said in a reassuring tone.

They met up with Diatta and the others in the chamber where the first skirmish had taken place. The wizard Harry had stunned was still out cold and tightly bound. He was floating behind Izzet.

There were several passageways to choose from, and Harry once again turned to the snake for answers. He asked the viper if she knew a way out from where they were without going back through the passage from which they'd entered the tunnel complex.

The snake knew several passages that led out of the tunnel complex, but none that would allow a human-sized being.

"It says that it doesn't know any passages that would allow creatures of our size through," Harry sighed in frustration.

"Ask it if the passages are through relatively thin surfaces, say...the length of its body," Mordecai suggested. "After all, it's just a snake. It may not realise that we can blast our way out of here if that's the case."

The snake said that there was a very thin passageway they could use, and Harry told her to point them to it. So they set out through the maze of tunnels, following the instructions. Wortelgraaf had to deactivate some more Curse Capsules before they finally came to a place where light streamed in from a little hole. Harry blasted the wall apart, and the Rangers walked out into the blazing sun.

Harry gently turned Padma over to Mordecai and started back into the hole he'd just made.

"Where do you think you are going, Potter?" Diatta barked.

"I'm not leaving Wolfe behind, Lieutenant," he yelled over his shoulder as he scrambled in. "He can't fight Skaras alone. He'll die!"

"I'm coming with you!" Mordecai offered.

"Don't be stupid! It's dangerous in there. You have a wife and baby." Harry paused and swallowed. "I'll have greater freedom of movement if I go alone, and the snake will guide me. Besides, back home they'll

probably say 'good riddance' if I don't make it," he choked out in a strangled voice. Then, without looking back, he ran into the caves.

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Padma drank an herbal potion that made her feel much better, and now she was nibbling on a bit of toast. She was sitting on a small seat in the cargo area of a magical craft, roughly as large as a medium sized Muggle cargo plane, and it was shaped like a manta ray. One of the witches who had rescued her from the cell, a mediwitch, gave her a check-up and asked her a load of questions.

They were interrupted when two of wizards who had rescued her carried in the one who had stayed behind to delay Skaras. He was in bad shape, but he was alive. Immediately the witch, Ivanova, rushed over to help him.

Padma overheard her asking, "Where is Potter?"

Wolfe whispered a reply that she couldn't hear, but the shocked expression on Ivanova's face said it all. Harry hadn't made it out.

Padma slumped back in her seat. Harry Potter...dead. Her throat felt strangely constricted, though she had no idea why. Harry Potter, he had become a monster like Voldemort, hadn't he? He had tortured his best friend, after all.

She shook her head. She could hear his reassuring voice telling her that he would get her out. And he had got her out. He had saved her from the terrible place where she'd been held prisoner for four months. She'd thought she'd never get out alive nor see her family again, but thanks to him she would!

He'd risked his own life to go after a fellow and got him out. A monster wouldn't do that.

Tears were starting to well in her eyes. She had been wrong about him. Everybody had been wrong about him. They should have listened to Remus Lupin, who had defended Harry, saying that Harry

had been under a lot of pressure throughout his entire life and that not having an outburst would have been inhuman.

She understood now. Harry wasn't a monster. He was...had been, possibly the world's greatest hero, for Muggles and wizards alike.

Cradling her head in her hands, she spilled the first tears of sorrow for the boy who lived and fought...and died, to protect people like her, never having been forgiven for the only evil mistake he'd ever made. And it hadn't been truly evil either! It had been done in a fit of rage, a human reaction.

But she would try to make things right! Padma Patil wasn't one of the Daily Prophet's top reporters for nothing. She would make them realise, as she had realised. She owed him her life, and to return the favour she was going to save his memory! It was the least she could do.

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## Chapter 4

### Matters of Honour

It had happened again; he had lost another one. Another Ranger had died because of him! After Skaras had broken free of his magical vortex, Wolfe had fared rather poorly in the fight. Not that he had expected to beat the ancient vampire. After all, Skaras could even survive in the sun for short periods of time. He'd managed to weaken the vampire, but his efforts hadn't been enough. He had resigned himself to death at that point.

Skaras had been toying with him when Potter arrived on the scene. The kid had put a full body-bind on the vampire and fired numerous stakes into him. One of them must have pieced Skaras' heart. Wolfe couldn't help but smile at that memory. Potter had learned his lessons well! He had known that old vampires usually keep their hearts somewhere else in their bodies and had taken the correct course of action to optimise his chances of hurting the vampire. He was also surprised that the body-bind had worked, even in Skaras' weakened state, since vampires over a thousand years old were highly resistant to many hexes and curses. Potter must have been very powerful indeed.

Then the boy had decapitated the vampire. Skaras was past tense!

Wolfe winced as Evgenia Ivanova set his arm and mended the broken bone. He knew he should have been pleased that Skaras was dead. After all, the vampire had killed his mother's father and his own father...both Rangers. Skaras' minions, lead by his second in command, Athanasios Anastasiou, had then killed his mother and grandmother, in retaliation for the imprisonment of their master in a magical bubble created by then Captain Donovan Ironheart and another Ranger, Commander Lei Li, his mother's grandfather.

His family's destroyer was dead, but Wolfe didn't feel the least bit gratified. All he could feel was a dull ache in his chest, as if it was an over-pressurised kettle. It was a haunting and indefinable sensation he'd felt only once before in his young life. It had happened after he and three other Rangers fought their way out of a trap set by

Voldemort's Romanian supporters four years ago, when world-wide dark wizard activity was just starting to pick up. They'd surprised their foes with their skill and fought their way out, but one by one his teammates had fallen. An English wizard called Astor Clagg, his team leader, and the only person he'd ever let get close, had ordered him to go while covered his retreat.

Wolfe closed his eyes and pictured their faces. Clagg, pink faced and good-natured. Elvira Bonetti, serene and beautiful, the woman he'd had a crush on, and Abdul el-Hage, with stern, hawk-like features and no sense of humour. They had died so he could live. And now Harry Potter...

He couldn't have Apparated out of there, because the dark wizards in league with Anastasiou, the vampire who had supposedly been running the plot had put Apparition barriers over the tunnels. Nobody could have survived that!

Wolfe clenched his hands into fists to stop his hands from shaking, and he closed his eyes as he remembered.

"This is the end...Ranger! Yes...I remember your father, that pesky Avery Wolfe...and his father-in-law, Rudolf van de Ketel. Yes, your family managed to delay my plans quite bit over the last century, and your great-grandfather even managed to trap me for twenty-three years, imagine that!" Skaras chuckled and kicked Wolfe in the stomach, sending him skidding back ten feet. "It looks like I had the last laugh."

"You had your true last laugh two-thousand years ago. You don't belong in this world anymore, Skaras! The world changes...you don't."

"Quite right, young Wolfe, and you see, that is why I must carve out my own little empire and mould it as I please. Unfortunately, the Order of Illumination meddled in my affairs again, and I will have to start over." The vampire pursed his lips. Of course, the silver lining to this cloud is that Lei Li's descendant won't be there to thwart me." Again he kicked Wolfe savagely, and the young Ranger spat some

blood. If it hadn't been for his tough Graphorn-hide armour, the vampire's foot would have gone through his chest.

Wolfe gave him a bloody grin. "You're going down. It's only a matter of time. There is a sun behind your metaphoric cloud. Never forget that!"

Skaras never replied to that taunt, for at that moment, his body froze in place, and seconds later, stakes were sticking out of it like a pincushion. Then Wolfe's sword whistled through the air and slashed off Skaras' head.

"Funny how they always lose their head in the end!" a voice panted.

"Potter, what are you doing here? I thought I ordered you out of here!"

"You're welcome!" Potter grinned as he helped Wolfe up. Then all of the sudden, Skaras' body went slack as it overcame the Petrificus Totalus, and the mouth in the severed head opened and emitted an ear-splitting shriek that passed through marrow and bone and caused the walls and ceilings of the tunnels to crack. It was the death-cry of ancient vampires intended to rally their minions to avenge them.

"We have to get out of here!" Wolfe said.

"Don't worry, I know the way," Potter said. He looked at the snake, which was hissing uncontrollably. "We don't have much time."

They hurried through the tunnels dodging falling debris from time to time, towards the alternate exit the team had found.

Recalling the information about the tunnels from their briefing to his mind, Wolfe estimated that they would need ten minutes to get out of the tunnels at their current pace, which was too slow for comfort. He heard the howling of vampire ghouls who were gaining on the two Rangers quickly, trying to find a way out too. The problem of course, was that the ghouls would kill them as soon as they came across them, and were too numerous to defeat. They were standing on a narrow stone bridge that connected the tunnel they were standing in



with the tunnel they had to go to. It was positioned over a deep chasm that ended in darkness. Wolfe could hear the roar of a fast-moving underground river below.

"Go on ahead! I'll hold them off!" Potter said.

"If you do that you won't get out!"

"Just go straight ahead. Don't take any of the side tunnels," Potter continued, pretending he hadn't heard Wolfe.

"No!"

"Wolfe! If I don't, neither of us will get out of here! You're in no shape to hold these ghouls off. You have a couple of broken ribs, and your wand-arm is broken!"

"I don't need my wand!" Wolfe growled.

"I know how good you are when it comes to wand-less magic, but trust me, it won't be enough. Now go, damn it! You still have some relatives who love you. And it'll break Galatea's heart if you die, even if you don't feel anything for her, which I doubt. You care for her too, because you allow her to call you by your first name." Potter swallowed before continuing. "You shouldn't throw that away."

Wolfe really didn't feel like discussing women and their strange behaviour with Potter, but he understood the underlying meaning of Potter's words and tone. Potter was suggesting that Wolfe should go, because he had people who cared about him, whereas Potter had nothing to come home to. "Are you trying to get killed? Is that it? Do you want to die because you think won't be missed if you do?"

"No! This isn't about my life. It's true, I don't have much of a life anymore...but that's not the reason I'm doing this. It's pure math. If I don't hold these things off we both die, and in our stupidity betray the vows we made to protect the innocent. You can live to fight another day! Now move it before it's too late."

Wolfe bit back a reply and thrust his own wand into Harry's hand. "You can fight better with two wands!" Then he turned around and started to run towards the exit. As he drew further away, he could hear Potter shouting hexes and curses, trying to hold the ghouls off as long as possible. He also heard the familiar booming of his wand when spitting curses.

He was sixty feet from the exit, when a huge shock rattled the tunnels and accelerated the cave-in. Dust billowed out from inside the tunnel and overtook him as he made his way towards the exit. He cleared the dust cloud and stumbled into the arms of Caleb Mordecai.

"How are you feeling?" Ivanova asked, snapping Wolfe out of his reverie.

Wolfe stared at the ceiling of the cargo bay of the Notus. That was the name of the craft. It had three sister ships, each ship named after one of the four winds. The Notus was a troop and cargo carrier, and therefore sparsely furnished.

"Wolfe, are you okay?" she asked again.

He looked at the Indian girl they'd rescued. She was quietly weeping in her chair. He absently noted that she would look quite lovely once she'd recovered from her ordeal.

Caleb, who came closer than anyone else to being his friend, sat down next to him. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Wolfe regarded the Israeli for a minute. "Skaras is dead. Potter avenged my family and all Skaras' victims over the past two millennia. My great-grandfather would have loved him. He was...we were all very privileged to have known him. I don't think I'll ever meet a greater man. He sacrificed himself so I could get out to fight another day. There was no way both of us could have gotten out. I almost wish I could have stayed and fought beside him to the end. I wanted to, but he wouldn't have it." For the first time in over ten years, tears blurred Wolfe's vision. "Astor, Elvira, Abdul, and now Harry Potter. How many more have to die so I can live? At times I feel like I'm living on borrowed time."

"Like right now?" Caleb asked

Wolfe nodded. He stared past Caleb and out of ship's loading ramp. "We can't leave him like this. We have to at least recover his body. They never recovered any of the others." He whispered, referring to his three fallen friends. "He once told Galatea, that he wanted to be buried in the grounds of Hogwarts, near a Whomping Willow."

"I don't think time or resources can be spared to do that," Caleb sighed sadly. "We are too hard-pressed as it is."

Wolfe shot upright, his nostrils flaring. "If they leave him behind like this, I quit!"

"I do not think Harry died just for you to quit," a deep female voice said. It was Lieutenant Diatta. The Senegalese woman gave him a hard stare, and Wolfe looked away, to the surprise of the other Rangers, including Diatta.

"I guess you're right. But we should still mark the area...erect a monument. People want to forget that he ever existed, Lieutenant. Children will grow up never knowing his name, or what he did for the wizarding world. At worst, they'll believe him to be the monster the British wizards have made him out to be! It's a matter of honour for me."

"They won't!" a timid voice interrupted. It was the girl they'd rescued. "They won't remember him as a monster. I'll make sure that everybody knows the truth about him. It will probably be the end of my career, because my boss is among those who believe Harry was an evil fiend in disguise. But I couldn't live with myself if I didn't do anything about it."

Diatta nodded. "Harry Potter deserves to have his name cleared posthumously. You are a reporter, correct?"

The girl nodded.

"And you are planning to write an article on this event?"

Again the girl nodded. "If that's okay with you."

"I do not wield that sort of authority. I am merely a lieutenant. But I will shoot a request up the channels, to see if we, who knew Harry in the final stage of his life, can make statements to corroborate your story."

"That vill not vork!" An icy and emotionless voice said. A willowy woman with raven hair and a rather large nose strode into the Cruiser Notus. "She is not allowed to remember anything. Ve haff to keep a low profile in this matter."

"What?" Wolfe, Ivanova and Mordecai chorused, outraged.

Ivanova started jabbering at the woman in Russian, but the woman would not be swayed. She remained as stoic as a goblin."

"Captain Kovalenko, please!" Caleb began. "Fine, we don't have to make statements...but can't she at least remember that Harry was part of this? I mean, someone is going to get a letter of regret, so the news is going to spread anyway."

The woman thought about it. "I will take it up with Commander Nomvete," she said, turned on her heel and strode out of the Cruiser's cargo bay.

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Hermione stirred as a harpy eagle tapped on the bedroom window of her tiny little flat in Eldorado, a golden city somewhere in the north of the amazon jungle. It was six o' clock in the morning local time, and she had to get up to go to the Eldorado Research Institute for Magical Maladies, one of the better magical medicine training centres in the world.

Groggily, she reached for her wand and magically opened the window to allow the postal carrier in. The bird dropped the Daily Prophet and a Witch Weekly onto the nightstand next to her bed and flew off. She didn't have to pay for them because she had a special

overseas subscription to the British Daily Prophet and the Witch Weekly. The issue on her nightstand was a day old, having come from overseas, and dated Thursday, August 24th, 2000. But Hermione didn't mind having to settle for slightly aged news. It was better than no news at all.

Hermione climbed out of her bed and strode purposefully into the bathroom where she had a quick shower. In Eldorado, she needed at least two showers a day to keep from smelling. Ron, who was on assignment for the International Confederation of Wizards to monitor the Vipertooth population, didn't shower more often than he used to in Britain, which had certain unfortunate consequences.

Normally Hermione would have come out of the shower feeling refreshed, but a huge fight with Ron the previous night had really drained her of her energy. She wasn't sure whether she wanted to make up with him either.

Hermione sighed. She had thought they'd come so far from the days when they used to bicker over the most trivial things. Now there was only one hot issue between them. Unfortunately that issue was Harry.

Ron walked in as she was writing a letter. She had sent three letters like it already in the past month, and the post office assured her that her letters did arrive at their intended destination. But she had never received a reply.

Tracking Harry down had not been difficult. On her last visit to her parents she had gone over to the Auror Office of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. The witch at the desk had given her the strangest look as she asked how she could reach Harry, complied with her request all the same. Hermione sent her letters to a special mailbox in the Department of International Magical Co-operation, which in turn, if everything went according to plan, would be sent to wherever Harry was living. Hermione assumed that all went well because she didn't want to think the Ministry had sunken so low as to block any letters for Harry Potter.

"What are you writing, Mione?" he asked cheerfully. Hermione heaved an annoyed sigh at the pet name, but she didn't look up from the letter.

Trying to get her attention, he whisked the letter away from her desk.

"Ron...no!" she gasped. She watched his facial expressions as she braced herself for what she knew was coming.

Shaking with fury, he crumpled the paper. "I can't believe you! You...of all people, betray me like this!"

"Honestly, Ron!" She tried to sound casual, but her voice was trembling. "I..."

"Shut up!" he screamed. "I can't believe you're consorting with the enemy!"

"He's not the enemy!" Hermione yelled shrilly.

"You don't know what you're talking about! You didn't see the look in his eyes when he cursed me! He is evil, Hermione. He looked even worse than Lucius Malfoy."

"He apologised afterwards, and explained!"

"And you believed him?" Ron growled. "He just pleaded temporary insanity to stay out of trouble. The only reason they let him off is because he killed Voldemort."

"I believe he meant what he said!" Hermione sobbed. "If he were evil, he wouldn't started Auror training, would he? If he were evil, he would have finished you off when put that curse on you! How can you judge him like that? How can you dismiss all the good things he did for you and your family for seven years?"

"Why do you always defend him?" Ron went on, quickly turning tack. "I lost Dad and Fred too, but I didn't go crazy did I? You're supposed to be smart. Why can't you see him for what he is?"

"I do see him for what he is! I imagine it's horrible to see your own friend lose it, and be on the receiving end of his curse, but your trauma is clouding your judgement. He looked miserable in those pictures the Daily Prophet took last year in June, in the article about the new class of Aurors. That couldn't have been an act! If he's really evil, he'd be strutting around like Draco Malfoy, with an annoying smirk that rubs in the fact that he got away with something!"

"I knew it!" Ron yelled, with a gleam of manic triumph in his eyes. "You're in love with him. Hah. I've always known you had a soft spot for him. That's the reason you didn't want to be my girlfriend until the end of our sixth year. 'Dear dear, but what will Harry think? He'll be all alone.'"

"That's ridiculous!" Hermione howled "He needed his friends more than ever then! Or do you conveniently choose to forget that Voldemort tortured and killed twenty Muggles and let it be known that it all could have been avoided if Harry had just surrendered himself? And Fred and your father...I'm sure he was thinking about them as well when he tried to get information out of Malfoy. I love you, Ron. Right now I can't imagine why, but I do!"

Ron didn't answer that. He just raised a quivering finger and pointed it at Hermione. "Either you stop trying to contact him, or you and I are through."

"I'm sorry it had to be this way then!" Hermione said coldly, tears streaming out of her puffy red eyes.

"What?" Ron screamed with disbelief etched on his features. "Oh, bloody hell. Fine!" He stormed out of her bedroom and her apartment slamming the door closed behind him.

Not really being hungry, Hermione forced down a banana anyway, as she opened the Daily Prophet and started to read. She flipped through the pages and read several articles. She saw that St. Mungo's was looking for mediwitches and wizards. She marked the article with the tip of her wand. She was nearly done in Eldorado anyway, and though she had enjoyed her year in South America, the weather was too humid for her. And Ron wouldn't be able to leave his

assignment for another six months, so that would give her some time away from him.

Hermione continued to read the paper. She smiled as she saw the wedding announcement about Neville and Eloise Midgen's wedding. She had been invited too, but she hadn't been able to make it. Ginny had attended the wedding, and Hermione was sure she would receive a letter later in the week, in which Ginny would give her a blow-by-blow account of all the accidents Neville inevitably must have caused in during the ceremony and reception.

A couple of weeks ago, Hermione had received a letter from Ginny, asking her if she could make it to the wedding, and if she couldn't, whether she wanted to mail a present so Ginny could bring it to the wedding for her. She'd bought them a Searcher, an object that looked much like a Remembrall, but with a different function. The Searcher activated itself while held by a wizard who was looking for a lost possession, glowing brighter if the object was nearby, and dimmer as the person searching for the item got colder. She knew Neville could really use a gift like that...of course, he would probably lose it too, at some point.

She frowned as she remembered another paragraph in Ginny's letter, in which the youngest Weasley talked about a new boyfriend, a French half-blood named Adrien Lenoir. She knew Adrien. He'd also spent some time in Eldorado with the research institute, and Hermione didn't like him one bit. He was too much of a sleaze, and she hoped Ginny knew what she was getting into. Crookshanks hadn't liked Lenoir either, and he was a good judge of character.

Hermione shook her head. Perhaps she should give Lenoir the benefit of the doubt. Either way, she couldn't believe that Ginny had a boyfriend. She knew Ginny still loved Harry more than life itself, even though she hadn't told anybody but Hermione about it at first, because of Ron. Later, when it had become apparent that the other Weasleys had forgiven Harry for his brief and understandable lapse, she'd told them as well.

Ginny had taken a huge chance by talking to Hermione about Harry. After all, at the time, Hermione too had been pretending to side with



Ron. But now, she was glad that Ginny had taken the first step. It had taken an immense load off her chest.

Hermione frowned worriedly. She just hoped that her friend wasn't dating Lenoir for the wrong reasons. Lenoir simply wasn't Harry.

She blushed guiltily at that last thought. Ron had been right when he'd accused Hermione of having a soft spot for Harry, but it wasn't because she was in love with him. Harry had never noticed her little likes and dislikes the way Ron had. That's what had made her fall in love with Ron in the first place. And her extremely vicious fight with him was hurting her terribly, but she knew she couldn't give in to Ron if...no, when he would come by later that week to try and patch things up. He was so predictable when it came to these things!

Ron's experience must have been terrible, but it was time that he got over his trauma. But like William Blake said, 'It is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend.' How true that statement rang.

Still having some time on her hands, she reached over to the Witch Weekly and read the cover; "Head of Department of International Magical Co-operation and Secretary Romance?" written by none other than Rita Skeeter. The old cow was at it again! Hermione shook her head. Well, at least she was registered now, and people who wanted to avoid media coverage were always on the lookout for a certain beetle.

Hermione smiled. She knew better than to believe anything Skeeter wrote, but she wouldn't be all too shocked if this little story turned out to be true. After Penny was killed by Death-Eaters, Percy had never been the same again, and he started working harder than ever. Penny's death also made him realise that the threat from Voldemort was very real, and he'd reconciled with his family and joined Dumbledore. But after Voldemort's demise, he was still hurting over her death.

Maybe Hannah Abbott, his secretary, would fill that void now. Even if it was just a fling, at least Percy was showing human behaviour again. The article would probably mortify Mrs Weasley, though. Hermione smiled. The thought of her best-behaved son savagely taking his

secretary on the desk...Hermione shook away her nasty thoughts. At least George would be proud of his older brother for a change.

Finally she went back to the front page to see if there was anything else she might have missed and discovered that Padma Patil, who had been missing for four months, had resurfaced. An international team of wizards had rescued her from her captivity at the hands of vampires. Other details were sketchy at best, and according to the article, Padma had been forbidden to talk about it.

Hermione shrugged. At least not everybody who disappeared did so permanently. It was good to know that sometimes people were still rescued. She made a mental note to write Parvati and ask how her sister was doing.

Then glancing at her magical chrono, she saw she was running late, so she grabbed her stuff and hurried out of her apartment.

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Later that day at the Burrow, the family, minus Ron and Bill, had gathered for the family dinner. It was a new tradition that the children and in-laws would gather at the Burrow every Friday.

Ginny scowled as she helped her mother load the table with the delicious food Molly had cooked up over the course of the afternoon. It was hard work, but the Weasley matriarch really enjoyed it. Ginny guessed it was therapeutic for her mother to cook like that.

"Wipe that look off you face, dear," Molly admonished.

"Oh, now I can't scowl when I want to anymore?"

"Not while you're still living under my roof."

"Then maybe I should move out," Ginny hissed, glaring at her mother, her face reddening in anger.

Molly turned and looked at her daughter, and a stare-down ensued between the two women. They finally looked away at the same time.

It was Ginny who spoke first after a while. "Why don't you like him, mum?"

"Oh, I don't know dear." Molly sighed. "He just doesn't seem sincere."

"What do you mean?"

"It's hard to explain. It's just that my mum approved of Arthur immediately when she met him. I guess we have a knack for these things when it comes to our daughter's boyfriends. I actually dated a Ravenclaw boy in my fifth year, and he came to visit during the summer." Molly giggled. "Mum really made it tough for him. But I'm sure you'll have the same feeling if you ever have a daughter."

"There won't be much of a chance for that if you keep acting nasty towards my boyfriends, now will there?" Ginny groaned.

"I'm so sorry, dear, but I really have a bad feeling about Mr Lenoir. Even your brothers have that feeling, and they are denser than lead."

The Weasley-daughter's eyes widened in surprise and she nearly dropped the salad bowl she was carrying. Her mother never spoke like that about her sons. Well, only when she was angry and yelling at them. Certainly not in casual conversation with her daughter! Then she cracked a smile. "At least we agree on that." She sighed as she thought of her brothers. Bill was off in the Caribbean with Fleur and their eighteen month-old-daughter, Amelie. Fleur was teaching wizarding children part-time on the French overseas dependency islands, while Bill dove for the many sunken ships full of treasure that had never been recovered. Fleur was pregnant again, and according to Bill it would be a boy.

Charlie was still single, and not really looking, to Mrs Weasley's great displeasure. He was the head of the Beast Division in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, for which Ron also worked. Percy, who had very nervously contacted his mother that afternoon to ask if he could bring Hannah to dinner, was the head of the Department of International Magical Co-operation.

George, who like Fred and unlike Bill who chose to wait until after the war, had decided not to let Voldemort interfere with his life, married Katie Bell right after he left Hogwarts. She'd given him a red-haired son named Arthur, after his grandfather, who had been killed a few months earlier. Having turned three two weeks ago, he was the eldest Weasley grandchild. The boy didn't remember his mother, who had been killed by Death-Eaters ten months after his birth, along with his Uncle Fred, who had left behind three month-old twin girls and his widow Angelina. Fortunately, their deaths had caused George and Angelina to grow closer and to love one another, and Angelina had given birth to their mutual child exactly one year ago. So the dinner occasion was extra special.

She looked outside and saw that George and Angelina had arrived with their four children. Baby Fred, who impossibly enough also had his father's fiery red hair, was sitting in a buggy for three, along with his twin sisters, Susan and Mildred, who were seventeen months older than he was. They looked very much like their mother, though their skin colour was a couple of shades lighter than their mother's cinnamon complexion.

Molly's permission was a definite requirement at the moment, for during cooking she reigned supreme in the kitchen. So Ginny glanced at her mother, who smiled and nodded, excusing Ginny from her culinary duties so she could go outside to greet her nephews and nieces. She hurried out of the kitchen door, and little Arthur broke free from his stepmother's grasp and launched himself at Ginny, who caught the boy and twirled him around. Then, still holding Arthur and balancing him on her hip, she bent down and kissed the three other children, especially the little one-year-old Fred. "Oh, I still can't believe that he has red hair!" Ginny sighed.

"Neither can I," the boy's mother said. The red in the Weasley hair must be magical."

Ginny smiled and kissed her sister-in-law. "Good to see you again."

"Why, we just saw you last week," George laughed.

"Yes, but you didn't have to spend a whole week with mum," she said.

"You got me there." George winked.

"Is it that bad?" Angelina asked.

"Smothering," Ginny replied tersely. "She won't come to grips with the fact that I'm not eleven anymore," she added, and heaved a sigh. Even though the house was empty except for her and Molly, it seemed too small for the two of them at times.

For a brief moment, Ginny thought maybe it was time to leave the nest, but she dismissed that thought as soon as it entered her head. That would only happen over Molly Weasley's cooling corpse. And then her ghost would probably try to prevent Ginny from leaving.

The young woman sighed. She got along with her mother well enough...most of the time. If her mother would only stop treating her like a baby, they'd probably get along famously.

They all went inside, and started setting up the restless children for dinner, which wasn't easy. They were Fred and George's offspring, after all, and while the girls looked perfectly angelic right then, Ginny had a feeling that they would probably surpass their father and uncle as troublemakers in the future.

The children cheered as their Uncle Charlie Apparated into the kitchen, nearly causing Molly to crash into him as she was carrying a large bowl of mashed potatoes.

"Charlie! What did I tell you about Apparating into the kitchen at dinnertime?"

"Sorry, Mum." Charlie sighed exasperatedly. Then he beamed at little Fred. "And here's the birthday boy!"

"Leave him in the chair Charlie," Angelina warned. "He won't let us strap him in again!"

Hannah and Percy arrived at the Burrow a couple of minutes later and they all sat down to eat.

Ginny and Hannah volunteered to help Angelina feed Fred and the girls. While the girls could actually feed themselves, Ginny could imagine the cogs in their little heads turning and clicking as they saw Arthur, who was a bit clumsy, making a huge mess as he ate. The girls would have followed his lead, and their mess wouldn't have been accidental!

The brothers talked about their work. "So how is business, little brother?" Charlie asked George.

"Great! Lee managed to buy me fifteen percent of Majoke Inc. Stock while it was cheap. Then we launched our new Luminous Liquorice line and they were such a hit that the shares doubled overnight. It was actually an idea Fred had a couple of years ago. He wrote a diary full of ideas. Lee and I are looking into them to see if they are commercially viable. There's a Language Lollipop we are working on right now...if you eat it you'll speak a different language. So far we've got our volunteer guinea pigs speaking French, German and Spanish. But we're pretty close to a breakthrough in Chinese and Hindi."

"Wait a minute. Are you saying you own fifteen percent of an international joke shop chain?" Percy asked, amazed.

"George nodded." And Lee owns ten percent. That gives us a quarter of the vote, and we always vote on the same side. The other shareholders always come to us if they want to pass new corporate policy."

Angelina interrupted. "George, could you please discipline your daughters, they are being a pain!"

Ginny smiled. In a way, Angelina was raising George alongside their kids. While she could have easily told Millie and Susie off herself, she was making George do it in order to make him more of an authority figure to his children rather than just an oversized sibling. She knew that, given the chance, George would much rather play the big brother and get in as much trouble as the children.

Although the two identical little devils were actually Fred's, George considered them his own, like Angelina considered Katie's son as her own.

While a visibly reluctant George scolded his daughters for their behaviour, Ginny looked at Angelina. "You know, your hair looks all greasy and untamed. Are you having a bad hair day? And your hair is all greasy too, Hannah. Is that a new style, have I missed a new fashion here?"

Molly Weasley heard Ginny's comments and narrowed her eyes as she examined Angelina. "Are you pregnant again?"

"Guilty!" Angelina blushed.

Molly smiled, but half a second later her smile faltered and she looked at Hannah. "Oh, no!"

The young woman was blushing furiously, and Percy was shifting in his seat uncomfortably.

"You got her in trouble...Percy how could you?" she shrieked.

"I didn't get her in trouble mum!" Percy countered. But Molly didn't hear him.

"Oh lord, you're not even married...the shame!" she moaned.

"Honestly mum, they're both adults!" Ginny frowned. "And many people don't marry these days."

"Besides, we are married. We eloped in March." Percy said calmly.

For Molly, who had been on the verge of fainting anyway, that was it. Her chair tipped back and she hit the kitchen floor.

While Ginny rushed over to help her mother, George was patting Percy on the shoulder. "I never thought you had it in you! Following in Bill's footsteps. I wonder what he'll say?"

"He was best man!" Percy grinned.



# Requiem for a Ranger

## Chapter 5

Commander Donovan Ironheart paced around in his office, located at the top of the tallest castle spire. It was very large and circular, having a diameter of about fifty feet. Part of the wall was covered by large bookracks that held an assortment of books on dark arts and a host of magical trinkets he'd collected over the years, and others were covered with magical paintings and tapestries. An old Ranger in one of the paintings was watching his successor as he walked around restlessly.

Mrs Ironheart had decorated his office in warm woody colours that made many visitors feel quite at ease. The furniture also lacked sharp angles, and everything seemed rather soft and curvy. The woman did have good taste, and Ironheart knew he was lucky to have her. He had done more than enough things that could have caused his marriage to end, but his wife was very forgiving, and in the end she won out over her rivals.

Two weeks had passed since Potter's disappearance, and there seemed to be little indication of his survival. It was now noontime in Nomad Island, September 6th, a Wednesday, and the weather inside the magical dome was cloudy.

The silvery haired man stood up straight until he stood at full height, and regarded his subordinates steadily.

Forty-year-old Captain Irina Kovalenko, nicknamed the Ice Princess, but not to her face, looked extremely tired. She was nervously biting the nails on her beautifully manicured hands, and she had an uncertain glint in her otherwise cold grey eyes. Her relative youth had led to many questions about her recent promotion to Captain, and that was an issue she was still dealing with. She did so by being extremely demanding of her people, and extremely aloof towards them. Her nervousness was unfounded because she had nothing to worry about. She had done her job superbly. With the help of the Rangers, the Indian Ministry managed to remove at least ninety-five percent of the known bad apples.

Lieutenant Diatta, also primarily an Intelligence Ranger and Kovalenko's immediate subordinate, held a huge stack of neatly organised documents. She had copies for every officer who would be attending the meeting.

Ironheart's counterpart, Commander Nehanda Nomvete, a woman from Zimbabwe slightly older than he, stared out of the window, observing the peaks of the tallest hill now shrouded in clouds, where Phoenixes lived. She was waiting for Captain Matthias Faust, who was directly in charge of the team to which Potter had belonged.

They heard a knock on the door.

"Come in Faust," Ironheart answered, and a second later a panting and pink-faced German Ranger bowed and saluted to the two commanders. Ironheart smiled. "More exercise and less bratwurst for you, my friend."

The German mumbled something under his breath and asked, "May I sit down?"

Ironheart gestured to a round table, and the four more senior Rangers sat down while the lieutenant passed out the reports.

"Have a seat, Lieutenant," Nomvete began. "Your insight into this matter is most crucial."

Failing to conceal her surprise, Diatta sat down. "Yes, Commander?"

"Irina relayed your words to us, about a memorial for Harry Potter."

Seemingly sharing her mind, Ironheart continued, "At the time, we couldn't do anything about it. It would have alerted our foes to our presence. However, now that the matter has been resolved, we feel that a memorial service is in order."

"So if I understand correctly, security is not an issue anymore," said Diatta

"Indeed. Seeing as you were his last Team Leader, the task of organising the service falls onto your shoulders. Not all of Harry's classmates will be able to attend since most of them are out on missions of their own." Ironheart raised his hand, and three letters came floating over to the conference table. "These were letters from a Hermione Granger. I ran a check on her....Muggle-born...currently undergoing mediwizard training, and quite brilliant. Not quite as powerful as most of us, but she would make a fine addition to the Rangers. In fact," he nodded at Kovalenko, "Irina's been following her progress for quite some time."

Diatta looked puzzled. "You want me to recruit her? What are we talking about?"

"Dear me, I strayed from the topic, eh?" Ironheart looked a little embarrassed. "No, these letters were for Harry. They were about to be forwarded to him, but when he went missing in action I kept them back. After it became apparent that Harry was no longer with us, I opened them." He ran his hand over his face and rubbed his eyes. "I just wish she'd written Harry sooner."

"Why? Who is this Hermione Granger?" Faust asked

"She was one of his best friends at school, and apparently, I gather from these letters, she never really blamed him for the unfortunate incident and the reason she never told him was out of loyalty to her boyfriend, Harry's other best friend. And according to her, the Weasleys realised that Harry really hadn't meant to put the Cruciatus Curse on his best friend," Ironheart explained.

"What about that best friend? Did he forgive Harry?" Faust asked again.

Ironheart slowly shook his head. "No. It seems he hasn't."

Faust sighed in disappointment, and a pregnant pause ensued.

Faust was stroking his moustache, Kovalenko started biting her nails again, her gray eyes fogging up, and Diatta looked dismayed. "The people he cared about forgave him, and he never knew about it?"

"How cruel the universe can be," Nomvete said, bowing her head gently and pressing her fingertips together.

Ironheart cleared his throat, forcing the lump that had been forming away. "I hereby bestow upon you the authority to do whatever it takes for you to give him a proper memorial service. I need you to travel to Hogwarts and ask permission from the Headmistress to erect a small monument there in his memory since we do not have a body to bury. Minerva McGonagall and I go way back, so that shouldn't be a problem. Convincing their Ministry of Magic will be a bit tougher. That is why you have to contact Padma Patil, Remus Lupin and Hermione Granger. In fact, you will hand carry the letter of regret to Mr Lupin. Since only our contact at the British Department of Mysteries knew what became of Harry after he completed his Auror training, you may have to answer some questions after he reads the letter."

"I'm...I haven't gone on a mission like this before, sir. I wouldn't know...what to do," Diatta stammered.

"It isn't a mission. It's a tribute." Ironheart leaned back in the high-backed chair and crossed his arms. "You may take eight Rangers with you, who will assist you in your efforts. Maximilian Wolfe, Caleb Mordecai and Okan Izzet are on their way back from their Basilisk mission. I'm sure they would want to join you, and as they are Harry's former teammates, I think it is highly appropriate that they accompany you. Heidi Gravenstein has also expressed her desire to participate in a memorial service and so did the Kelly brothers. Only Nathaniel will be able to go, however. Matt is scheduled to be patrolling Old Atlantis on a special request from the Atlantian merfolk. They're having some problems with a highly aggressive sea serpent."

"I didn't think sea serpents were aggressive," Irina frowned.

"Oh, this is no ordinary sea serpent. But let us not stray from the current topic."

"I suggest you take the people who knew him best!" Faust nodded, steering the meeting back towards the original topic.

"But are we certain that he's dead?" Diatta blurted out.

Ironheart smiled sympathetically. "I realise this must be hard on you, and I understand your reluctance to accept the fact that he is dead. It's hard on all of us. But you know the potency of our current detection equipment. If he'd been alive, we would have known."

Diatta hung her head. In the past twenty years, the Rangers had busied themselves with attaching magical monitoring devices to over eighty Muggle satellites. They were much better than the Muggle observation devices, and could detect wizards through over half a mile of solid rock, and pierce all kinds of magical barriers. That was how her predecessors in Intel had found out that the headstrong former Ranger Commander Lei Li had started training his great-grandson illegally in the ways of magic in a magic-shielded basement from the age of six. It explained why Wolfe was so good at wand-less magic. Recently, the magical monitoring artefacts were had been improved a lot, and now they were even able to detect animagi and most forms of wand-less magic. Of course, not even the International Confederation of Wizards was allowed to know about that. A lot of people would be very uneasy if they knew that they could be watched so closely at all times, and no doubt Ministries all over the world would try and disband the Order of Illumination. Understandable, for if they were to turn into an Order of Darkness, they would be infinitely worse than the Death Eaters had ever been. It was all a matter of preventing them from pondering 'Sed quis custodiet ipsos custodes?' Who watches the watchmen? Diatta heaved a sigh.

Nomvete reached over and patted her hand. "You know, we are not only doing this for Harry, because he wouldn't care if his name were cleared or not. Well, he would, but only if it concerned the people closest to him. We have to do this for the wizarding world to point out their mistake so they may learn from it."

The younger woman gave her a bewildered stare. Nomvete always said the strangest things at the strangest moments. " Pardon me if I don't follow you, but what are you trying to say, Commander?"

"What Nehanda meant, is that you could look at it that way, if you want to see it like a mission," Ironheart clarified. "So you can distance yourself emotionally."

"Thank you, Commanders, but I too feel a sense of loss, and I want to embrace it, not distance myself from it. I just wanted to be absolutely certain that Harry wouldn't reappear. It would make matters worse for his reputation. The people who hated him would then accuse us of rousing sympathy under false pretences."

"I understand your concern, but you can be quite sure that it won't be the case," Kovalenko said quietly. "I had my teams sweep the planet three times. I too hoped for him to be alive."

"Are you up to the task?" Faust asked.

Diatta nodded.

"Good. You are dismissed," Nomvete added, nodding.

Diatta rose, saluted and retreated from the office.

Ironheart looked at Nomvete. "Can you handle this meeting by yourself, Nehanda?"

His counterpart nodded. "You have to be somewhere else?"

Ironheart nodded wearily. "I have to mentally prepare myself to write that letter of regret. I've written so many of them these last few years that I ought to be getting good at it, yet I'm not. But I guess that's a good thing, eh? It proves that I care, right?" He coughed and cleared his throat again.

"His team was my direct responsibility," Faust pointed out. "Perhaps I should write it?" he offered.

"Thanks kid, but I need to do this myself."

Nomvete and Kovalenko exchanged brief smiles. At times, Ironheart still called Faust 'kid', though the German was already fifty years old.

"I am older than you were when you started calling me that, sir," Faust smiled.

"Yes, well you'll always be a kid to me. You, Vassily and Avery Wolfe were my boys!" The brief cheerful expression that appeared on his face as he remembered those days vanished. "I had better get started."

Ten hours later, Donovan Ironheart was sitting at his desk at home, on the 6th level of the city where the rich and prominent citizens lived. An empty parchment lay in front of him and an eagle feather quill stuck between his fingers. He took a sip of a Muggle drink he was rather fond of, a Cuba Libre. He had to bend a lot of customs rules to smuggle the components for the drink in, but in his opinion it was worth it.

His wife had already turned in for the night. In the course of the afternoon, he had gone out to the market with her, and they ended up doing a lot of things carefree couples did together. He'd simply told her that he loved her as they sat in the city's most elegant five star restaurant, the Golden Griffin Palace, and made her blush like a young girl, after forty-five years of marriage.

But he couldn't put it off any longer. The letter would be addressed to Remus Lupin, who was once again teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts. He had never turned his back on Harry. Ironheart knew this was because the man had been a close friend to the boy's parents, his godfather, and later the boy himself. And a werewolf's life was a hard one, and gave a person insights that others didn't have. Lupin could therefore probably have identified with Harry better than most.

Sir, I wish there was a way to soften the news...

Ironheart shook his head and waved his hand, magically erasing the sentence. A beginning like that would only contribute to a sense of mounting dread for Lupin, before the rest of the letter would confirm it. He tried several sentences, and found something wrong with each of

them. Then he found the correct one, and after that, words and thoughts were starting to come to him easily.

An hour later, he looked down at the piece of parchment.

He waved his hand and the many candles went out. He went to bed, knowing that he would get precious little sleep because he had to get up at four in the morning. But at least it would be five peaceful hours of sleep.

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Ginny had never been as diligent and ambitious as Hermione, so a career as an overly schooled mediwitch was not her thing. But she did like to take care of injured people, so training as a nurse was right up her alley. To her delight, she had been accepted as a nurse in training at Hogwarts, where she was assisting Poppy Pomfrey.

She gave a first year Hufflepuff boy a dazzling smile and a kiss on his newly mended wrist. "All better!"

The boy flushed crimson and muttered his thanks before he hurried out of the hospital wing.

Madam Pomfrey smiled kindly at her. "That was very good Ginny."

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey," Ginny replied.

"Oh, you can call me Poppy, dear. We are colleagues now, after all."

"Oh no, I'm just a nurse in training," Ginny said shyly.

"Nevertheless, you are also a staff member. You can even take off house points if you must."

Ginny laughed. "I'd rather not do that unless I have no choice."

"Neither would I, dear. Now go on down to dinner," Pomfrey said.

"Aren't you coming Madam...I mean, Poppy?"



"Oh no, dear. Winky and I have to get started on a new batch of Pepperup Potion," she said, nodding to the protective and nurturing elf, dressed in miniature nurse's clothes.

Winky had finally come to terms with freedom, and was now officially a staff member, like Dobby. Ginny smiled as she remembered Dobby, coming up to serenade Winky three nights ago. The male elf had been wooing Winky ever since her seventh year, but Winky either wasn't interested, or she was just playing very hard to get.

" I'd like to help," Ginny said. "It would be a good opportunity to practice."

" We're making a second batch tomorrow. You can help me then."

"All right," Ginny said as she went to the Great Hall. She was very hungry indeed, and her mouth started to water as her pert little nose caught the scent of food emanating from the great Hall. Once there, she sat down between Professor Lupin and Professor Flitwick.

"So how did you like your first week as at Hogwarts, Ginny?" Flitwick piped.

"I'm really learning lots of things from Poppy...you know, things they didn't teach me at Stonehenge." Ginny smiled.

Bedside manners obviously isn't one of them. Poppy's is terrible. I caught one of my second years' doodling your name in hearts in his notebook." Lupin teased.

Ginny's cheeks reddened. "Oh be quiet," she mumbled, taking a bite of chicken. She had always liked Professor Lupin, and the first thing she had done upon her arrival at Hogwarts, had been to go see him and tell him how she, her family, except for Ron, and Hermione felt about Harry and if he knew where Harry was.

At first she had been afraid that he might reject her apologies, but he'd been very understanding. Apparently, Hermione had beaten Ginny to it, and Lupin had told her that Hermione had owled and

explained the matter to him. However, Harry had departed without telling Professor Lupin anything. All he had done was leave Hedwig with him. Lupin told Ginny that he'd advised Hermione to go to the Auror Office at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, since it would be likely that they knew where he went.

When she'd asked why he didn't try to contact Harry himself, he'd simply said that he believed Harry would seek contact when he was ready to.

She chewed and looked around the Great Hall. Dennis Creevey, the new Head Boy, sat next to Gabrielle Delacour, a fourth year exchange student from Beauxbatons. Dennis wasn't bad looking, and he was a very funny and charming boy. Gabrielle was staring up at him with puppy dog eyes, which prompted a smile from Ginny. The girl definitely fancied him. A little more to the left, she saw Colin's ghost come floating out of the wall arm in arm with Moaning Myrtle, who hadn't moaned ever since she'd met Colin, and she was blushing silver as he whispered something in her ear, looking down on his younger brother.

"Dear me, that's Padma Patil. And who is that with her?" Flitwick squeaked.

Lupin and Ginny looked up from their dinner, and saw a man clad in black walk in, accompanied by Padma Patil. The stranger was wearing what looked like a medieval style high collared long-shirt. It was belted at the middle by a thick leather belt, to which a special wand holder was fastened. His lower body was clothed in breeches, which from the looks of them reached his upper calves and were overlapped by black knee-height fold-over boots. Two silver eight-pointed stars decorated the collar of his shirt, and a similar emblem decorated the upper left side of the vest he wore over his shirt. The legs of his breeches and sleeves of his shirt were trimmed with parallel silver lines. His right sleeve also had a bar just below the shoulder that probably represented a rank. It had three silver pips.

Padma was wrapped in what looked like his cloak, for it had the same silver-star emblem where it would cover the wearer's upper left chest.

Ginny found the man handsome, with his olive complexion, dark hair and eyes, strong jaw and symmetric features. She estimated his age at twenty-three or twenty-four. But his eyes looked old, as if they had seen so many terrible things, reminding her very much of Harry. Whenever Harry used to have that look in her fifth and sixth year, she would just put her arm around him and tell him that he had to be strong, and that she would always be there for him.

Her heart shrank as she remembered. She hadn't been there for him, because she hadn't wanted to upset Ron. She wondered where Harry was, and whether he was happy.

McGonagall, no doubt alerted by Filch, hurried into the great hall and overtook the young man, demanding who he was and what he was doing at Hogwarts.

"I beg your pardon for barging in unannounced, Headmistress," he said in a raspy baritone voice. He cleared his throat before continuing. "I am Maximilian Wolfe, Ranger Fifth Class of the Order of Illumination. I am carrying a message for Remus Lupin." He nodded towards Padma, who wrapped herself more tightly, in his cloak. "I take it you remember Ms Patil?"

McGonagall smiled and nodded. "A Ranger at Hogwarts, I should have recognised your dress uniform! How is Donovan doing? Donovan Ironheart...Is he still a Ranger?" she asked, and Ginny wondered why the Headmistress blushed as she said that name.

The man nodded with an impassive face. "Ranger First Class, ma'am. I 'm under his command. I 'm carrying a letter from him."

"But what is it about?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, ma'am," the Ranger said, stony faced.

Padma couldn't mask her features as well as the Ranger could, and Ginny didn't think it was good news for Remus. Maybe Remus would have to register himself with this Order as well, so they could keep an eye on him. Ginny only knew a little about the Order of Illumination. She knew they were wizards who patrolled the world to fight evil, but

they couldn't honestly believe that Remus was evil, could they? After all, if he were, why would they be letting him teach?

McGonagall walked him over to the table and pointed Remus out, and Padma stood a couple of paces behind him, smiling weakly at a few seventh year Ravenclaw girls who were trying to get her attention.

The Ranger looked at Padma. "The letter is in the left pocket of my cloak. Could you please hand it to me?"

Padma reached into the pocket and gave him the letter with a trembling hand. Now cold worry was really starting to nibble at the back of Ginny's mind. What was this about?

Lupin had taken the envelope from the Ranger. "Should I read this somewhere private?"

The Ranger's face remained a mask of control. "Perhaps it would be better if you did".

"Do you want me to come with you?" McGonagall asked. Ginny wasn't used to seeing her this nervous or curious.

The Ranger looked at the floor, seeming to think it over. Then he looked at McGonagall. "I've been told to include you in this matter as well, even though the letter is for Mr Lupin. Is there somewhere we can discuss this privately?"

McGonagall pointed to the room to the right of the teacher's table, and Lupin rose from his chair and strode towards the adjacent room, followed by the Ranger, McGonagall and Padma.

Ginny concluded that Padma knew about this too, and her curiosity and apprehension continued to increase.

After a minute, which might as well have been an eternity to Ginny, she could no longer temper her curiosity and she walked over to the room. She could feel the students looking at her expectantly. No doubt they were just as curious.

She knocked and pushed the door open, and just as she opened the door, Lupin let out a howling scream, grabbed a heavy chair and smashed it to pieces against the wall before punching the wall with his fists repeatedly. Then, like a candle that burned out after a moment's flare, he sank down against the same wall he tried to break with his bare hands.

"Professor Lupin!" she gasped and slammed the door shut behind her. She hurried over to him and knelt down beside him. She was about to ask him what was wrong, when her eyes caught the words on the letter that was lying on the floor in front of him.

Sir, it is my sad duty to report to you the death of Ranger Seventh Class, Harry James Potter.

While on assignment in India to help purge their Ministry from enemies within, Harry's team encountered and defeated a numerically superior foe, a vampire's nest under the leadership of Hannibal Skaras and allied with local dark wizards. Harry personally defeated Skaras when going in after a fellow Ranger who had remained behind to delay Skaras, so the rest of the Ranger team could get out safely with the vampire's captives and a captured dark wizard, who proved invaluable to the breaking of the conspiracy against the Indian Ministry. Harry died in a cave in, fighting to delay ghouls responding to Skaras' death scream, so his comrade could escape to fight another day. Had he not done so, neither of them would have got out alive.

In the time that Harry served with us, I found him to be an excellent Ranger, superior wizard and magnificent human being. His talent with snakes allowed the Indian mission to run much more smoothly, and I have no doubt that his team's casualties would have been much higher had he not thought of using this talent. Even among our ranks, there are few who show the amount of courage and dependability he showed as a matter of routine.

I cannot begin to appreciate your loss, but in reflecting on his death, I realise that his passing has effected me greatly. I no longer believe that the momentum of a life headed in a worthwhile direction ends when that life does.

Harry Potter defeated Skaras and countless lesser vampires, all of which served evil. If he hadn't acted the way he had, their actions would have led to further evil, but his actions take their place instead, acting as a firebreak to prevent the spread of evil into future generations.

Harry Potter saved his fellow Rangers with his talent and devotion. As such, a bow wave of suffering that would have rippled out, scarring survivors and leaving nothing but loss behind, was prevented.

In the future, while I look at people relaxing in the company of friends, and people living without having to fear for their lives, I will never know how much good around me is a legacy of Harry's life. His future will be invisible to me. But invisible is not the same as non-existent. I will know that his deeds and accomplishments still move among us, phantoms that represent everything good he stood for, and I am grateful for it.

With respect,

Commander Donovan Ironheart.

Ranger First Class, Order of Illumination.

Ginny's mind had gone numb after reading the first sentence. For a hundred heartbeats she could only stare into nothingness, her mind struggling to remain conscious. When her force of will finally won out, she was not prepared for the storm of conflicting emotions that swept through her. Anger, loss, despair, hopelessness...guilt. An icy knife of anguish plunged deep into Ginny's heart. Hot tears started spilling down her cheeks.

The last thing she had said to him was to get out of her sight. She hadn't meant it, but he would never know that now. Wracking sobs shook her as she got up and stumbled away, out of the room and into the Great Hall.

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That night, the sky was full of owls carrying news of Harry's death from Hogwarts to many homes across Britain. The following morning, the Saturday edition of the Daily Prophet had a lengthy article written by Padma Patil, with statements from several of Harry's fellow Rangers, though they had to remain nameless. Everyone who wanted to attend Harry's memorial service, which would take place on Hogwarts grounds, had to be there at seven P.M.

All of the students, with the exception of some Slytherins, were present, as well as many others, including a tearful Hermione, who had been fetched from Eldorado by Rangers Lilia Rosaria and Nathaniel Kelly, and transported to Scotland by Port Key.

She rushed over to where Ginny was standing, and looking like her heart had been ripped out of her chest. Lenoir was trying to comfort Ginny, and doing a very poor job of it. Hermione also saw that the Frenchman was extremely annoyed at Ginny for his lack of success, like a spoiled baby who wasn't getting the attention he wanted. This would have made Hermione very angry, if her grief for Harry hadn't been so exhausting.

She was also hurt by Ron's refusal to change his mind.

"Come on, Hermione. Please forgive me? It won't ever happen again."

"That's not enough, Ron. I want you to realise that Harry isn't an evil maniac. There is no room for compromise here!"

Heavy knocking on the door interrupted them. Not expecting anyone, Hermione asked, "Who is it?"

"My name is Nathaniel Kelly," a booming voice said in an Australian accent. "I am a Ranger of the Order of Illumination. I trained with Harry Potter. I'm sorry if this is a bad time, but this is urgent."

Hermione opened the door to be confronted with a hulking man that dwarfed even Ron. He was wearing a strange black uniform with silver trimming. "Please, come in."

The big man shook her hand and gestured towards a plump woman about as tall as Hermione, with short and spiky black hair and black eyes. "Lilia Rosaria, also a Ranger, and she's also a mediwitch."

A delighted Hermione was totally ignoring an ever more angry Ron. "How nice to meet you! How is Harry? I suppose he's a Ranger too, then? I knew he'd do something like that. He's on a mission right? Otherwise he'd be here to see me and..." She spoke very quickly, as only Hermione Granger could.

The big man, Nathaniel, produced three letters, and Hermione quieted down as she saw them. He held them out, not looking Hermione in the eye. "Harry..." He had trouble breathing and couldn't aspirate to produce sound and it affected his ability to say any more.

"Harry was killed in action before Ranger Command had a chance to forward your letters to him. I'm sorry!" Lilia said, she too was looking at the floor looking at the floor as well.

Hermione started shaking her head. "That...no! You're lying! Get out!" she yelled. She started shoving and beating against at the big man, who easily took her punches without moving. "Noooooooo," she wailed, sinking to her knees.

Lilia knelt down beside her and threw an arm around Hermione's shoulder. "You were right about him!

Hermione's head snapped up. "What do you mean, I was right about him?" she demanded through her tears. "How do you know that?"

Nathaniel suddenly looked very uncomfortable, but Lilia seemed unperturbed by Hermione's question. "We know about the letters you sent to Harry."

"What? Those were private! How dare you?"

Lilia's gave her a small apologetic smile. "The Commander opened them after...we were certain that Harry was no longer with us," she said, her soprano voice roughening with emotion. "But he had to know...I mean, Harry never got mail, and we thought it was because



everybody hated him...so the Commander, well, he wanted to know the contents of those letters. If it had been hate-mail, we wouldn't have bothered coming here to find you."

Hermione's insides went icy cold with guilt as Lilia's words reminded her that she should have contacted Harry much sooner.

"He proved everybody who believed him a monster wrong, by joining the Order of Illumination to fight evil and protect the innocent." Lilia continued. "I am proud to have known him."

Ron snorted in disgust. "So he had you fooled too, huh? Harry was just doing that to cover himself."

Nathaniel growled. "Keep your comments to yourself if you want to keep your face the way it is! I can't believe Harry ever made friends with you! You're petty and resentful!" he said emotionally. "You don't know anything about how Harry felt! He was safely out of the danger zone during the mission that killed him, but he went back in to save a fellow Ranger, who was stuck fighting an ancient vampire called Hannibal Skaras."

Hermione gasped as she heard the name.

"Harry destroyed Skaras...!" Nathaniel continued.

"Of course, it takes a monster to beat a monster!" Ron interrupted.

Lilia Rosaria, already a volatile personality, whipped out her wand and pointed it at Ron. "That's it, you fucking asshole. You're gonna to pay for that!"

Nathaniel grabbed her wand arm and yanked it out of alignment so she couldn't hex Ron!

"Eager to curse are we?" Ron smirked. "Birds of a feather..."

Lilia was struggling to get good aim, but Nathan calmed her down. "Lilia, he's not worth it, and Harry wouldn't have wanted you to do it!"

He turned to look at Ron. "I recommend that you make yourself scarce, sir."

"Yes, go away!" Hermione sniffed softly, wiping her eyes with a hanky Lilia had given her."

Ron's eyes narrowed. "You believe two strangers over me?" He growled, both anger and hurt evident in his voice. Oh bloody hell. You know, maybe you're right...and we should end it. I don't know why I've wasted my time with you!" He shrugged. "Oh well, it wasn't a complete waste. You were a good lay," he said bitterly, before Disapparating.

Hermione looked up at Nathaniel. "He wasn't always like that, you know," she choked out, unbelievably hurt and embarrassed now by Ron's parting words.

The big Australian nodded. "But that's no excuse for his behaviour."

"He's fighting his inner demons, but it looks like he isn't doing too well," Hermione muttered.

No words were needed for the two young women. They both cried freely as they clung to each other.

George, Angelina, their children, and Mrs Weasley, her face also tearstained, walked over to them. She was holding her eldest grandson by the hand, while Angelina held their youngest child. George was holding the girls' hands. Charlie and Percy also came over, Percy arm in arm with Hannah, and the members of the press didn't miss the opportunity to snap pictures, until Amos Diggory, the interim Minister of Magic shooed them away.

"I am so sorry, Hermione," Molly Weasley said softly as she hugged Hermione. "About everything." Hermione knew the woman meant that she was sorry about both Harry and Ron!

Hermione hugged each of the Weasleys in turn, and also Gabrielle Delacour, who came over to offer her condolences. She too had a

bond with Harry, after he went out of his way to get her out of the lake during the Tri-wizard Tournament

Hermione was surprised to see Bill and Fleur, and their daughter show up. She hugged him fondly. "I didn't think the goblins would let you come."

Bill smiled, though it was subdued. "Actually, they're here too!" He nodded at a cluster of five goblins. "They reckon they would have gone out of business, if it hadn't been for Harry. I don't think they actually feel gratitude, but they probably think it's good for business or something, if they are seen here."

Hermione and the Weasleys moved towards the front of a crowd of about two thousand, as the ceremony was about to begin.

One of the Rangers, a man with light brown hair and a weathered and tanned complexion, stepped up on a podium and pointed his wand at his throat, activating the Sonorus Charm. He let a piercing hazel gaze sweep over the crowd, before he focussed on a monolith that looked to be about as tall as a man and half as wide.

" I am Caleb Mordecai, Ranger Fourth Class, and I was the most senior Ranger in Harry's team." He gestured at the veiled monolith. "This monument has an unmarked twin in India, that stands over Harry's grave. He does not rest easy in that grave." He paused for a moment, letting the silence remind everyone of the true purpose of the ceremony. "Harry Potter was never truly at ease, except when he was fighting. He does not rest easy now, because there is yet much to be done."

Mordecai brought his head up to face the crowd. "Harry Potter was not a man who gave up, no matter how slim the chances of success. He took upon himself the responsibility to deal with a threat to his fellows, and the world in general. Heedless of his own safety, he fought overwhelming forces, and by sheer force of will and courage and spirit, won through."

He looked up into the twilight sky. "Each of us who knew him has, in our hearts, dozens and dozens of examples of his concern for others,

and courage, and his ability to distinguish what was right from what was merely easy. He wasn't perfect, but he sought to be the best he could be! In his case, it was an even greater achievement, because he believed there was nothing in it for him. I refer to the way many of you have shut him out of your hearts. Most of us, when we fight, do so for the people we love and the people who love us. Yet Harry received no love. He was content with giving it, so others in the future who otherwise might not, could receive it. And Harry didn't even know happiness in his brief time as a Ranger. Indeed, he was unable to produce his once so awesome Patronus anymore, for all his happy memories were tied to the wizarding community that rejected him. But he fought on anyway!"

Many people were staring at the grass guiltily.

Nodding towards the monolith again, Mordecai continued. "Harry is now gone. The burdens he bore have been lain down. The responsibilities he shouldered have been abandoned. The example he set is no more."

By now, half of the crowd was crying. Hermione had mixed feelings about all this show of emotion. She knew that many of the people who were present had their own agendas, wanting to benefit from their presence and not caring less about whether or not Harry had redeemed himself. They were only pretending, and Hermione suppressed a surge of anger at their opportunistic behaviour. Her own insides squirmed guiltily as well. She should have stood by Harry from the beginning, like Professor Lupin and Aberforth Dumbledore had. A werewolf and a suspected lunatic weren't very credible, but as former Head-Girl, Hermione felt she could have contributed a lot to Harry's defense. Not to mention how much her support would have meant to him.

"His loss is tragic, but a greater tragedy would be to let him be remembered as a faceless and nameless hero. He was a fighter as all of us should be and none of us will probably ever be. The things he took upon himself were more than enough to crush any one person, but we can all accept part of that burden and bear it together."

The Ranger stepped down, and nodded to another Ranger, this one higher in rank, having one gold pip on her uniform, instead of several silver ones. She pulled the veil off the monolith as the speaker joined the ranks of the other Rangers.

"Aim...fire!" he shouted, as they raised their wands, and a booming display of fireworks erupted from their wands and shot into the sky. "Aim...fire!" Again the process repeated itself, and twice more after that. Then the Rangers saluted and broke rank, moving towards their craft that resembled a manta ray.

The Monolith read in magically glowing letters:

Do not stand at my grave and weep;

I am not there. I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow,

I am the diamond glint on snow.

I am the sunlight on ripened grain;

I am the gentle autumn's rain.

When you awaken in the morning's hush,

I am the swift uplifting rush

Of quiet birds in circled flight.

I am the soft star that shines at night.

Do not stand at my grave and cry.

I am not there. I did not die.

Honouring the memory of Harry James Potter

(Mary E. Frye 1932)

## In Harry's Wake

### Chapter 6

Having stayed overnight at an inn in Hogsmeade, Hermione made her way onto Hogwarts grounds, accompanied by Padma Patil. They were on their way to the Ranger ship...or whatever it was.

"Hermione, why didn't Ron turn up yesterday?"

"Is this for an article you're writing?" Hermione asked, looking at her with an expression of mistrust and apprehension.

Padma smiled patiently. "I know you've had bad experiences with reporters, but that was uncalled for. Besides..." She took a letter out of the pocket of her robes and showed it to Hermione. "I got sacked this morning. I went over a lot of heads to have my article published."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not." Padma shrugged, taking her letter back from Hermione and tucking it away.

"I meant it as an apology for my reaction," Hermione said. "And to answer your question, Ron still believes that Harry was evil," she added, in a tone that suggested that she'd rather not talk about it, and thankfully, Padma suppressed her inquisitive nature and let it be.

As they passed the memorial Monolith, they saw a woman kneeling in front of it, and crying. For a split second, Hermione thought it was Ginny.

"That's Heidi Gravenstein," Padma said sadly. "I understand she and Harry were...close...for a while."

"Harry got over Ginny?" Hermione asked incredulously.

Padma shook her head slowly. "I don't think so."

Hermione sighed in vexation. "Padma, you're not making any sense. Anyway, she looks just like Gin...oh, I see!"

A slow smile spread over Padma's pretty face. "Good to see you're still as sharp as a Manticore's sting. Actually, I can't be sure whether he got over Ginny or not, but from the looks of that woman, I would say not. She is too much like Ginny. It can't be that Harry just liked redheads!"

Hermione blushed. She was glad that Padma was no longer upset with her for beating her O.W.L. score. Padma had been 2nd best, with an extraordinary fifteen O.W.L.'s, but Hermione's otherworldly feat of twenty-two O.W.L.'s out of a theoretically possible thirty, cast it into a deep shadow. "Your theory requires some big assumptions to work, but you might be right." She observed the red-haired woman more closely. About her age...and rather attractive. "So what's their story?"

"I don't know the details, but basically Harry succumbed to temptation." Padma shrugged. "I don't really blame him. She's pretty enough and more importantly, looks a lot like Ginny. And I reckon he was very lonely."

As they approached the vessel, they saw the name Boreas written on it in gleaming golden letters. A seam formed in the otherwise smooth belly of the vessel, and a circle lowered itself, with a rather short and thin Ranger standing on it. He had mousy hair, a thin, pasty face and a crooked nose.

Padma recognised him. "Gavin Carey, Ravenclaw Head Boy in from 1990 to 1991, Prefect before that, fourteen O.W.L's, correct?"

The man smiled. "Very good, Padma Patil, who attended Hogwarts from 1991 to 1998, Prefect from 1995 to 1998, overshadowing my own O.W.L. achievement by one." He then looked at Hermione. "Need I recite your achievements?"

"I can't guarantee your safety if you do!" She blushed.

He gestured for them to step onto the circle, and after they did, it rose smoothly up into the belly of the ship. Hermione was quite impressed

as she pondered the magic that had to have been used in the construction of the Boreas.

"I wish the other ships were this nicely decorated," said a plump witch, as she saw Hermione admire the ship. Hermione recognised the woman who had brought her the bad news.

"They're not?" Hermione looked surprised.

"No," Padma said. "I've seen another one, and it was quite sober." She looked at the Ranger for an explanation.

"This cruiser is reserved for the transport of important dignitaries," the Filipino woman explained, "when a good impression needs to be made." She gestured Hermione and Padma to have a seat, and they slid into a comfortable, almost circular booth. "Lieutenant Diatta will be with you soon. Can I get you anything in the meantime?"

"Butterbeer would be nice," Padma said, and Hermione nodded.

Lilia grinned, walked over to the bar and opened up a cabinet, showing no less than seven different flavours. "You'll have to be more specific than that."

"I wish Ron were here!" Hermione mumbled softly.

Padma, who had been the only one who heard her, nodded sympathetically.

"I'll have the sweet 'n salty." Hermione said.

"May I have the extra sweet?" Padma asked. Carey had stepped onto a square that had come down from the ceiling, and rode up onto what could only be the next deck.

As Lilia busied herself with their drinks, a crease formed itself in the ceiling, and the platform came down, with the African Lieutenant standing on it. "Get me a spicy while you're at it, Lilia."

"What do we say?" her subordinate smirked.



"That is an order?" Diatta smiled.

"That might work since you outrank me, but there is a better way."

"All right, please?"

"Spicy, coming right up."

Diatta slid down next to Padma. "And could you add those chocolate biscuits I like so much?" she asked Lilia.

"What do I look like, a stewardess?" Lilia scowled, and she silently muttered some swear words as she searched for the biscuits.

"You could well be!" Hermione giggled. "This place looks just like a first class compartment, no even better, those private planes rich businesspeople own...or the American President's plane!"

Lilia was about to comment, when a square detached itself from the rest of the ceiling and whooshed down. On it, was a shirtless Wolfe, whose eyes widened and cheeks flushed as he noticed there were two visitors on the lower deck.

"Up!" he barked, and the square shot up again.

Padma was giggling, for once reminding Hermione very much of her twin and Hermione's own face felt hot. "Was that a preview for in-flight entertainment?"

Lilia burst out laughing. Being a half-blood, she had flown in a plane a couple of times, and unlike Diatta, she'd understood Hermione's remark. She was distracted, as the elevation square came down yet another time.

"Wolfe bwoke my node, Lilia," said Nathaniel Kelly, who was pressing a piece of cloth tightly to his nose, and holding an unconscious Gavin Carey over his broad shoulder. "And I think he knocked pencil neck here into a coma," he said, referring to Carey.

"Did you deserve it?" Lilia asked.

Nathaniel nodded and sighed. "I guess. We told 'im the visitors we'en't here yet, that it was safe to come down!"

Diatta was frowning sternly. "But he still isn't allowed to strike you! Do you want to bring him up on charges?"

"Nah! You'd have to bwing us too. We deliberately set 'im up to be embarrassed. Let it slide. 'Sides, the look on 'is face was priceless."

Lilia brought the butterbeer and biscuits over to the booth, before dragging Nathaniel and Gavin off to the small infirmary room. "Come on, you dick! Let me fix that ugly face of yours...I swear, if you keep this up your face will end up looking uglier than your ass. You know, you've changed...you're supposed to be the quiet brother..."

Padma giggled furiously. "Can a Ranger walk round shirtless like that? I mean, I would think that there's a code of discipline in your Order?"

Diatta shrugged. "Officially there is. But no one's complained. The men didn't mind and the girls enjoyed watching the shirtless person in question too much. We can hardly give him a reprimand after all this time. Besides, he is extremely disciplined when doing his duties. Anyway, that's not why you're here." She took a sip from her butterbeer. "Ms Patil, we couldn't help but feel that it was our fault that you lost your job. My commanders are willing to pull some strings to get you a job in Concordia. These days, English is rivalling Latin as the universal language in Concordia more and more, and there is a demand for reporters who know English, so it wouldn't be too difficult. You can skip the one year waiting period."

Padma's eyes shone with childish excitement. "Really? I'd love too! Wow!"

Diatta nodded and paused to take a bite from her cookie, and then looked at Hermione. "Then there is the matter of Harry's belongings. He didn't leave a will, but he did tell our counsellor all he possessed

was to be divided among you, Remus Lupin and the Weasleys, including Ronald, if he would have it."

Hermione bit her lip, and her eyes filled up with tears again, which she quickly wiped away. She simply nodded, unable to speak.

"Before I continue, I also wish to apologise on for my crew's behaviour. I realise you must still be hurting, and I guess it's tough to see us laughing and joking as if nothing happened. But if we don't laugh about it, the life of a Ranger would be impossible to lead, because it would grind us down psychologically."

"I understand," Hermione said quietly.

"I was also given the task to ask you whether you wanted to join the Order of Illumination."

Hermione's mouth fell open.

"Your twenty-two O.W.L.'s say everything about your skill and diligence. I didn't immediately link your name with the event, when Command mentioned you, but now I remember reading the headlines!" Diatta smiled. "As a Ranger, you'd start earning about as much as a midlevel Ministry official, and it would increase as you get promoted. Our Commander earns enough to keep a nice place in the sixth tier of Concordia, but they could never pay me enough to become a commander!" She shivered, and explained that when she was a twenty-one year-old rookie, Ironheart had had a full head of dark hair. In that year he had been promoted to Commander, and his hair was had turned silver one year later! The stress must have been tremendous. That had been fifteen years ago.

The Lieutenant continued. "Oh, if you keep your quarters at the base you won't have to pay for a place to live, either. It'll be about as large as a...how do you call those places where single Muggles sometimes live, Lilia?" She yelled so that Lilia could hear her from the infirmary.

"Their parents' house?" Lilia laughed.

"Ouch!" They heard Nathaniel yelp.

"Sit still, butthead!" the plump witch's voice snapped at the huge wizard.

"You mean a studio!" Hermione nodded.

"That's the word." Diatta smiled.

"Interesting...and what kind of work would I do?"

Diatta started counting on her fingers. "Well, your records indicate that you would make a great Intel analyst, and you have excellent qualifications to be a medic. In the former case you'd work for Captain Kovalenko and I, and in the latter for Captain Sharif and Lieutenant Montoya. We know you lack the raw amount of power that most field operatives have, so you probably won't have to go into the field as often as I do, if you choose Intelligence."

"I'm not afraid to fight!" Hermione said, feeling slightly insulted. "I was Harry Potter's friend. I'm not bad in a scrap."

"I wasn't implying that you were afraid. I was just stating a fact. One of our recruiting criteria is raw magical power. You're brilliant, but not quite as powerful as most of us."

Hermione frowned, wondering how exactly the Order's recruiting process worked. She also wondered why they were asking her, apart from her intelligence and medical skills. So she asked, "Why me?"

"Intel scouts have been following you for quite some time...since you were thirteen. You've always shown great promise. I wasn't actually aware of the fact that you were being followed, but I'm often out in the field and recruitment procedure isn't really my department.

"Oh." Hermione's face softened. "Well in that case I think I'll accept your invitation. It'll be a good way to remember Harry." She sniffed.

"You shouldn't feel obligated to anything, Ms Granger."

"Oh no, I mean, I'd like to do it for me too, not just for Harry's memory."

"Shall I report your acceptance, then, or do you want to think about it? A decision like this is not made lightly."

Hermione shook her head. "Sign me up."

Diatta nodded. "Welcome into the Order, then. You will also receive a tough physical training regimen, because you'll still have to be able to hold your own in a fight. If you choose to become a medic, you'll probably find yourself in combat situations more often." She paused, and took a swig of her Butterbeer. "Personally, and this is only my opinion, you should choose to become a Medic. We only have..." She counted on her fingers. "Ranger Seventh Class Rosaria...that's Lilia, Ranger Sixth Class Angelou, Ranger Fifth Class Ivanova, Ranger Fourth Class Kozminski, Lieutenant Montoya and Captain Sharif. Captain Sharif has a magical artificial leg, and he's fifty-eight, so he never goes out on missions." She munched on a cookie before continuing, and Padma and Hermione patiently listened. "And Galatea's skin can't handle the outdoors very well. She only went out twice, and stayed in the ship both times. Besides, she has empathic abilities that make her an excellent counsellor. She keeps us all sane..." Diatta smiled. "...Whenever she isn't driving us women insane by pining over Wolfe," she whispered conspiratorially.

"Are romantic relationships between Rangers allowed, Lieutenant Diatta?"

Diatta shot her a peculiar look. "Why? Did your eye catch a certain shirtless someone?"

Hermione flushed red. "You enjoyed the view as much as I did...and no! I just want to know more about the Order's organisation." She wanted to know as much as possible about the Order she was going to join. She already knew some things, like the fact that they were much like a highly trained Auror force that operated on a global scale, that they were known for their honour and integrity, and that only the best and brightest of wizard-kind were ever approached with an

invitation to join. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Padma trembling, struggling not to start taking notes.

"Hmmm, where to begin? Well, there are seven classes, the upper three having the titles, Lieutenant, Captain, and Commander. Sometimes, there is a rank above that but I'll get back to that. Now, promotion from seventh to sixth class takes one year on average, from sixth to fifth three years, from fifth to fourth, six years, ten years in total. Then the Ranger serves as a Ranger 4th class for ten years, provided they don't get promoted, and then they retire...though many don't retire, even if they don't get promoted. They are kept in reserve, and quite a few came out of retirement to fight Voldemort's supporters."

"So how do you get promoted beyond Fourth Class?"

"By showing leadership skills," Diatta said. "You can shoot up the ranks very quickly through merit in your area of expertise, but if you want to become an officer, you have to be able to lead. Take Wolfe, for example. He's very powerful, and very flexible and resourceful in a fight. But he's terrified of having the responsibility over other people's lives. He was commissioned after a year of training, like you will be..." she said, looking at Hermione. "I forgot to mention that. The training lasts one year. All right, where was I, oh yes. Wolfe was only nineteen when he was commissioned...joined us when he was eighteen."

"That young?" Padma gasped.

Diatta nodded. "He finished Salem's Wizard Academy when he was seventeen...one year early. He did his first and second year in a single year. In fact, when he went to Salem he already knew enough about some subjects to pass his O.W.L.'s in them. But I'll tell you about that some other time. Where was I...yes, he was nineteen, and now he's twenty-three, that's four years. In theory, he should have been promoted to Fifth Class recently, but was promoted to Fifth Class two years ago because of his merit in combat. He's going to be the youngest Fourth Class ever, if his recklessness doesn't get him killed first."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"Never mind that. I shouldn't have entered this avenue of thought. If you want to know, you ought to ask him, though I don't recommend that...he's a private person!" she warned, before sipping her butterbeer. "Anyway, there are at all times two Commanders, six Captains and ten Lieutenants, no more, no less.

"Then there is the Ranger Prime. The Rangers have a magical Orb called the Orb of the First Ones. It contains the memories of all the Ranger Primes of the past. The memories are sentient, and they test every Commander for suitability. Neither Ironheart nor Nomvete, good as they are, were found suitable. We do have a Ranger Prime right now...Anita Basham, but she's one hundred and twenty-one years old, and she's not going to last very much longer. She's just finishing up adding her memories to the Orb, before she dies. In the six hundred years that the Rangers have existed in their current form, there have only been five First Rangers."

"Wow," Hermione sighed. She was just about to ask Diatta more about Wolfe, but the levitation square came down again with Wolfe on it, fully dressed and armed. Two other Rangers came down soon afterwards.

Hermione recognised the eloquent Ranger who had spoken at Harry's funeral. Girls had become women and boys became men had become as he'd recounted the Harry Potter's exploits yesterday. "We just got a message from Command, Lieutenant. It looks like there's an Acromantula colony in this forest that needs some culling. The centaurs in the forest have contacted their kin on Nomad Island. The spiders used to leave many other creatures in the forest alone, because their leader respected Hagrid. The leader is dead now though, and his eldest children feel no obligation to carry on their father's promise."

Diatta sighed at Hermione and Padma. "Duty calls."

"Can I come?" Hermione asked quickly, a hopeful look on her face.

"Can we come?" Padma added, and Hermione blushed a little as Padma reminded her of her selfish phrasing of her request.

Diatta seemed to be thinking it over when Wolfe grumbled. "The spider colony is big, and this is going to be tricky. I can't baby-sit these two. I'll be too busy killing spiders."

Padma and Hermione scowled at him, but he didn't seem fazed.

Diatta looked at the two young witches apologetically. "Sorry, but he's right. You two had better go back. I'm sure you need to do a lot of things to prepare yourself for the move to Nomad Island." She tapped a mirror on a bulkhead, and it glowed to life, the image of the Lieutenant's face being replaced by an Asian face.

" Yes?"

Diatta gestured at towards Hermione and Padma. "The ladies will be accompanying us to Nomad Island in four days. Please bring down two copies of Concordia through the Ages."

The face in the mirror nodded, and the image faded. Diatta nodded at the mirror. "Hwang is an artificer. He knows all about magical artefacts and the animation thereof. He's the principal pilot of this vessel, and he has to fix it if it malfunctions."

"Will I learn how to operate this ship?" Hermione asked.

"You'll learn the basics, and get some experience behind the controls, yes."

Hwang came down, holding two thick books, and offering them to Padma and Hermione.

Hermione and Padma discussed the book while walking back to Hogsmeade. "I can't wait to read this! I don't know much about the place," Padma said, her eyes gleaming with delight.



Hermione too, had a silly grin on her face. "Ooh, look!" She pointed at a passage. "Over forty-five thousand magical beings...and the elves are free!" she shrieked delightedly.

Padma nodded. "The governing body is called The Combine...my...look at that building...it's located on the top tier of the city along with the Lord Mayor's house. I can't wait to see it all up close."

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Four days later, the Patils and some of the Weasleys were all standing on Hogwarts grounds, saying their goodbyes. Hermione had already bidden her parents farewell, and promised to send them lots of pictures of the magical island.

George was there with his wife and children. Arthur was eating a Language Lollypop and chattering in Spanish because of it, while his two sisters were staring, first at Padma and Parvati, and then at themselves. They had never seen twins like themselves before, and were too young to remember or understand that George was their father's twin. They would get an explanation soon enough, because Angelina had found out that she was expecting another set of twins, which would put their total children's tally at six!

"Six is enough." she sighed, as she rocked Fred to keep him calm. "After this, I'm going on birth control!"

Hermione kissed George and his wife goodbye. "Be sure to come and visit sometime. And I read that there aren't any joke shops in Concordia, George. There is a definite niche in the market for you there!"

George raised an eyebrow. "Really? Then I guess I have to talk to talk to Percy to find out which steps should be taken to open a branch there. Thanks, Mione!" he said, cheerfully using her pet name to annoy her, as he strode over to where Percy, who was present in an official capacity, was speaking to Ranger Carey and Lieutenant Ranger Diatta.

Then Molly Weasley descended down on Hermione and showered her with advice, telling her not to do anything foolish and get herself killed, and not to talk to strange wizards.

"Too late for that, mum!" George called over. "She just talked to me!"

Molly and Hermione laughed.

"But you know what I mean, dear," Molly said, and Hermione nodded. She also read in Molly's expression, that the Weasley matriarch didn't want her to give up on Ron just yet, but that was something that Hermione knew was out of her hands. She loved Ron, and if he would ever come to his senses, she would welcome him back with open arms. But if he didn't she would have to get on with her life.

Ginny was up next, and she hugged her friend tightly. "Don't rush into anything."

"What do you mean?" Ginny frowned.

"Lenoir."

Ginny frowned. "No one can replace Harry in my heart." She bit her lip and a single tear rolled down her cheek. "I know he isn't Harry...but I need to get on with my life."

Hermione thought about Harry's relationship with Heidi. Part of her thought Ginny deserved to know how Harry had felt about her, but she decided not to say anything. Firstly, because all she knew, or thought she knew was based on second-hand information and an assumption about Harry's psyche. And second, Ginny did have to get on with her life, and telling her that Harry had possibly loved her as much as she loved him would not necessarily help her on her way to recovery. She just wiped away Ginny's tear. "Will you be okay?"

Ginny nodded, just as Charlie appeared and put his arm around his sister. "Good luck, Hermione. Make us all proud!"

"I'll try!"

Then Percy strode over and gave her a hug. "I think I'll be dropping by in a couple of months, for an official visit. The Ministry wants to discuss some new treaties with Concordia."

"Be sure to let me know in advance so I can be ready for your arrival," Hermione reminded him.

"Hey...it's me, Percy, remember?" the tall and thin redheaded man said.

"I don't know...maybe you're an impostor! The Percy I know would never elope," she joked.

Percy's ears went red, and he ran his hand through his already thinning hair. He took after his father a lot in that respect, like Bill, whose hair was also thinning, but not quite as bad as Percy's was. Hermione guessed it was the stress. "Yeah well, people change."

Hermione nodded sadly, thinking of Ron. "Yes...they do."

Percy realised what his remark had brought up. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"It's okay Percy." Hermione forced a smile onto her face. She didn't want the Weasleys to walk on eggshells, because of her predicament with Ron. They had all been very supportive towards her after she'd told them about it after Harry's memorial service. "Keep me posted on Ron, will you?"

Percy nodded solemnly. "I will!"

The dark and surly looking Ranger Wolfe came up to them. "We have to leave Miss Granger," he said in a low voice, all the while looking at Molly Weasley with narrowed eyes. "Excuse me ma'am, but are you related to the McKinnons?"

Molly's eyebrows went up in surprise. "Why yes. My grandmother was a McKinnon...Violet McKinnon. Why do you ask?"

"I recognise you from a picture taken at a family reunion. My great-grandmother's family reunion to be precise. Her name was Rose McKinnon, daughter of Elric McKinnon."

"Oh, then you're a distant cousin!" Molly said delightedly. "Yes! Great-aunt Rose married a Chinese wizard...my grandmother told me about that, goodness...Old Elric wasn't too happy about it. What's your name, dear?"

"Wolfe...Maximilian...Donovan, Wolfe, ma'am," he said haltingly, and Hermione guessed that the bashful Ranger rarely said his full name out loud. "My mother was at the reunion too, but she was killed shortly after that. Her name was Elisabeth van..."

"Ketel..." Molly finished searching her memories. "Elisabeth van Ketel...her father was a Dutch wizard...oh dear, she was pregnant at the reunion..."

Wolfe nodded slowly. "With me."

Molly stepped forward and shook his hand. "Well, it certainly is nice to meet you. Look after Hermione, will you? She's like a daughter to me."

"Uh...o...kay." Wolfe stuttered, looking at Hermione's embarrassed expression, and completely taken aback by the rather familiar request of a near perfect stranger.

"Honestly Mrs Weasley, I can take care of myself," Hermione huffed.

"Shut up, or I'll hex you!" they heard Lilia yell as she carried a hissing Crookshanks, who hated to travel in his wicker basket. Crookshanks sensed the witch was serious and ceased his annoying behaviour immediately.

Charlie nodded at Lilia and grinned. "She's got spunk. She single?" he asked Wolfe.

"Uh...I uh..."

"Why don't you go ask her?" Hermione said to Charlie, rescuing Wolfe from having to interact with an unfamiliar human being.

The Ranger used Hermione's distraction to beat a hasty retreat.

"I don't understand," Molly," she frowned. "His mother was a very jolly girl. I remember Elisabeth...strange..." she muttered. "I thought...oh, never mind." She smiled at Hermione again.

"I don't know...Mrs Weasley. I think he doesn't know how to communicate very well, especially with people he doesn't know."

"His eyes..." Ginny said quietly.

"Like Harry's," Charlie added. "I bet he's had a pretty rough life too."

"Yes," Hermione agreed. "I noticed too." She sighed. "Hopefully the other Rangers are a bit more normal than he is. I don't know how I'd cope if they were all that rude and distant."

"You don't have to worry about that," the redheaded Ranger, who looked like Ginny, said. "Ranger Wolfe is a loner. He works in teams well enough, but he excels in scenarios where he works alone." She looked at Ginny. "You must be Ginny."

Ginny nodded uncertainly. "Yes..."

The woman frowned darkly. "It seems you got your wish. Harry got out of your sight, and never returned into it. Just as well...because you didn't deserve to gaze upon him again!" she said bitterly, before glancing at Hermione. "Time to leave, Miss Granger." Then she spun on her heel and strode over to the cruiser.

A few anguished sobs escaped Ginny before she ran back up to the castle, tears pouring out of her eyes.

Hermione wanted to go after her and comfort her, but she realised that she had no idea what to say if she did, and she was actually surprised by the fact that Ginny hadn't tried to curse the daylights out of Ranger Gravenstein. She guessed that Ginny was too crushed,

emotionally, to fight right now. "I'll write," she mumbled at the remaining Weasleys, before she walked towards the Cruiser.

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Draco Malfoy had to use every ounce of his willpower not to strut down Diagon Alley with his trademark superior smirk on his pale face. Yes, the last few nights his dreams had been sweet. Harry Potter was dead!

After his trial two years ago, Potter had told him that he would get what was coming to him sooner or later, even if it wasn't at the hands of the Ministry. But Draco knew better than that! Voldemort had been a fool in his quest for immortality and world domination, and Draco had played both sides of the fence expertly. He'd always suspected that Voldemort wouldn't be the sure victor his father had made him out to be, and that he might lose his head at some point though not quite that literally. And while the Dark Lord was now the object of Nearly Headless Nick's envy, Draco Malfoy had survived.

He still marvelled at his own genius as he remembered convincing Voldemort not to give him the Dark Mark, arguing that being the son of a suspected Death Eater placed him under a lot of scrutiny already. He insisted that the Ministry would be checking his arms, or indeed his whole body after he returned from the Christmas holidays. Sticking to his idea had probably saved his life. Voldemort had tortured him for his insolence, of course, and accused him of being a traitor, but Draco had endured the Cruciatus Curse and in the end the Dark Lord had grudgingly admitted to seeing the merits of Draco's plan. And Draco had secured his own safety soon after, by co-ordinating the capture and murder of the Gryffindor Mudbloods Dean Thomas and Colin Creevey, thus delivering on his promise and proving to the Dark Lord that his decision to spare him had been the right one.

"After Potter's defeat of Voldemort", many of Voldemort's supporters were tried and convicted, and were now rotting in Azkaban, guarded by conquered Dementors. Draco had escaped justice by drinking an anti-mnemonic potion that erased a number of pre-selected memories, so he'd yielded no evidence of his involvement when he

was under the influence of Veritaserum. They hadn't noticed the gaps in his memories, and their case against him had already been weak in the absence of tangible evidence.

That idiot Percy Weasley had insisted that they investigate him further. But after Draco's eloquent speech quoting Dumbledore himself, saying that it didn't matter what someone was born as but what they grew up to be that was important, they'd let him walk.

He'd left himself a note saying that he should look in a safety deposit box. at a Muggle bank for his own personal and secret Pensieve, where the Ministry of Magic had never guessed to look, and thus he'd restored his memory.

To distance himself further from his past and because all of his father's money had been given out to the Death Eaters' victims, he took a Ministry job in the Office of House-elf Relocation. He chose this job to subtly spite Potter, and remind him that he now had control over the fates of many House-elves. Potter had protested to the Ministry, claiming that Draco was known to have abused an elf. But the Ministry's reply to the unpopular hero had been to inform him that Draco Malfoy never put the Cruciatus Curse on anybody. That had been the best day of his life after the war, until Saturday, when he'd got word of Potter's death. That was now his number-one happy memory!

While he worked at the Ministry, he'd saved every Knut while he moved on to bigger, better and more illegal things like smuggling dark artefacts. Sure, he'd had to take a lot of risks in his first year after the end of the war, but now it had paid off. He had already laundered most of his Galleons through a branch of Gringotts in Petra, Jordan. That bank was particularly known for its 'no questions asked' policy, and the local Ministry had a tough time checking the transactions because many of the Jordanian officials, while not evil, weren't exactly squeaky clean either, so they hampered many investigations and nothing got discovered.

By now, Draco had a fortune almost as large as George Weasley's but he still kept his job at the Office for House-elf Relocation for now, as a cover, if nothing else. He was planning to start a legitimate

business, something to justify his wealth, and after that, he would quit his job at the Ministry and buy back Malfoy Manor.

Now that the financial part of his five-year plan had been completed, the next course of action to take would be to re-establish the Malfoy name. He decided that he was going to do this by making large donations to charity, like his father had, but he could only start with that when the business he had yet to open was thriving. In the meantime, he was busy wrapping the proverbial strings around the limbs of people like Borgin. He always took Polyjuice potion before meeting Borgin, so the older man wouldn't recognise him, and he always had a different identity. This was a necessity while smuggling dark artefacts, to minimise the chances of Borgin finding out who he was. After all, crooks like that couldn't be trusted. If anything, he needed things to blackmail them with, rather than the other way around! That's why carried out all his illegal activities in disguise, and a little Confundus Amulet his father had left him served to baffle the Sneakoscopes his shady business relations always carried, so they never suspected him of falsehood and thus didn't question his identity.

As he walked into his office, he finally allowed himself to smirk. Harry Potter was dead, and Draco Malfoy was thriving. Of course, there was the problem called Percy Weasley, who was keeping too close an eye on him. Maybe it was time to orphan his unborn baby...of course, it had to look like an accident and be untraceable to him. But that could be arranged. Malfoy already had the blood of two Gryffindors on his hands. One more wouldn't be a big deal.

He went over his mail, and saw a marriage application made by Dobby the House-elf. Apparently Winky had finally consented to marry him.

Grinning broadly, he drew up a letter of rejection, stating that there were no laws concerning the marriage of ownerless elves, and that he therefore couldn't approve of any marriage. For a brief moment, Draco was actually sorry that Harry was dead, because no doubt it would have tormented him to see Dobby's attempt to exercise his freedom, thwarted. Too bad that Potter wasn't alive to witness it.



Officially, he'd have to draw up a request for a law to be written, to cover the rights of free elves, but he glanced at the heap of paperwork on his desk. He could probably say it slipped his mind and get away with it. All he needed was someone to witness him hard at work with the stack of parchments, so the person in question could support his claim that it had slipped his mind, should it ever get to that.

Draco chuckled as a delicious solution presented itself. He would use a House-elf as a witness! "Destiny is not without a sense of irony, Dobby!" he mumbled to himself, as he called Slinky the House-elf up to deliver his morning cup of coffee. He would complain about the heavy workload in the presence of the elf. He knew he he'd have to approve of the marriage at some point, but he would enjoy torturing his former servant for as long as possible. Ah, those were the little things that made life more interesting.

His mother's face appearing in a flame distracted him. "Draco."

"And what can I do for you on this fine day, mother?" he sneered.

"Why did you stand up Pansy last Saturday?"

Draco snorted. Because he'd been in too good a mood upon hearing about Potter's death. That shrew Pansy would have ruined a perfectly good day. Of course, he couldn't say so over the fire connection, because at the moment it wasn't prudent to say anything bad about the tragic hero, Harry Potter. "I thought it was highly inappropriate to go out and amuse myself on the day the news of the death of our greatest hero reached us, mother," he said instead.

Narcissa seemed to catch the message, and nodded. "Of course. But remember, we have to find you a nice girl of good family."

He knew that by 'good' she meant pure-blooded, but they had to be careful these days. "Of course," he replied. "Tell Pansy I will see her at her convenience. Goodbye mother!" he said, and broke the connection.

Draco leaned back in his chair. He really didn't want Pansy Parkinson, but there weren't many alternatives. He had wanted Fleur Delacour,

but she'd married a Weasley. Padma Patil was a pureblood, and very attractive, but she was too intelligent to risk a relationship with.

He needed a good-looking pureblood wife he could control. But there weren't many witches who fit all three of those criteria. Then a brilliant thought crept into his mind. It would be difficult, yes, and he'd need to be really convincing, but it could be done...and if he pulled it off it would be oh so satisfying!

He tore up the letter of rejection. Maybe...for the plan to work...he should publicly take a personal interest in the well being of House-elves.

## Of Life and Love

### Chapter 7

Pain! The pain would start at the crown of his skull and move its way downward to his toes. Or it would stab him randomly at various points both on the surface, and within his body, a body that felt like an ice cube set on fire, his flesh seeming to burn while his bones seemed to be freezing. Only, instead of heat and cold cancelling each other out, they supplemented one another.

Slowly, he rolled over and was immediately punished by a sharp blast of agony in his left arm. For a split second, he just wanted to curl up into a foetal position and die! But he immediately shoved the idea away. He'd been in much worse agony before, and he wasn't about to let this stop him.

He was lying with his lower body still in the water, which wasn't helping him keep warm. So knowing he had to get up, he rolled onto his right side, doing his best to ignore the pain. Then he drew his legs inwards so that they rested against his torso, his ribs hurting tremendously, telling him that a couple of them were broken. He raised himself to his knees by pushing against a soft and squishy surface, and vaguely saw his blurry looking hand sink into mud.

Harry cursed inwardly. The Oculus Reparus Charm treatment he had undergone six months ago was starting to wear off. He should have reinforced it before starting this four-month tour of duty. He'd reckoned he would have it done in between missions, since they were to head back for debriefing and forty-eight hours of rest and recreation after this mission. He knew that within seven days, his eyes would be back to normal, which wasn't a good thing because he didn't have his glasses on him. And he was practically blind without them.

After struggling to his feet, he walked a couple of paces, each step inducing a new wave of pain and nausea. Just as he reached a more solid surface, his legs refused to move any more, and he sank onto a mossy patch, comforted by a peculiar scent emanating from it, making his absently wonder what kind of vegetation it was.

The scent made the fog in his mind lift, and only now did Harry realise that he was in a very strange place. The sky was a pinkish purple, and the clouds seemed a pastel yellow. The other strange thing was that there wasn't a single sound to be heard, except that of rushing water and his own laboured breathing.

Then his attention was drawn by something that sounded like the fluttering of wings, and his eyes searched the sky. He thought he saw a shadowy shape fly over him, and it looked like a raven, though he could be sure given his limited vision. He couldn't trust his sight, but he did trust his hearing, and he knew there was another creature nearby.

Certainty was granted as he heard light footsteps, and a shadow fell over him from behind. Before he could react, a hand settled on his shoulder and a warm feeling replaced the pain that plagued him. As his pain slipped away, so did consciousness, and a comfortable darkness settled on him.

That was the last thing he remembered, before opening his eyes once again. His sight was now the way it used to be without glasses so Harry deduced that he must have drifted in and out of consciousness for at least a week.

He saw a blurry image with long, jet-black hair, wearing a green dress, sitting next to him. "Who..."

"Shhh," she said, and started speaking to him in a strange language. It was Latin.

Harry's Latin had improved a lot during his stay in Concordia, and he was able to understand quite a lot, though not everything she was saying. He stirred and tried to sit up, but a very soft hand gently pressed him down, on what felt like a heap of animal skins. Then she bent down and touched her forehead to his, and Harry could feel a light tingling sensation in his brain.

"Is this how you form your words?"

Harry nodded feebly and wondered how she'd done that. One moment she was speaking Latin, and after what was obviously some kind of magic, she could speak English.

"Do not waste too much energy," she continued. "For a long time you only ingested the special drink I made you, but you are still weak."

"How long was I out?" Harry asked weakly.

"Ah, the concept of time...I had nearly forgotten about that. Time is of no importance, here, but I would guess you were out of consciousness for nineteen sunrises and sunsets."

"That long...where am I? Who are you?"

"You are...in another realm. Some call it umbra, others call it mirror realm. And I am simply one of its inhabitants."

"How did I get here?"

"I am not sure. Through a portal, but I do not know which."

"How do I get out?"

Her hand stroked his cheek softly. "Do not ponder this. You are too weak." She brought a bowl to his lips and he drank greedily.

"What's your name?"

"I have no name," the woman said. "I am simply known as the caretaker of the wildflowers."

"You're a wood-nymph? Like a Veela?" Harry could vaguely see her shake her head. "Yes, and no. Long ago, the Veela decided to remain in your realm, while we limited ourselves to this one. Also, the Veela are only...female. Caretakers are both male and female."

"So you're immortal?"

"You could say that. But time does not mean anything here!" she said, stroking his bare chest, making Harry's heart rate quicken and his loins stir a bit. "Does this please you?"

"Er, please...I'm fine, you don't have to..."

"Do you not...appreciate my efforts?" she asked, and Harry thought he discerned a hint of disappointment in her voice.

"No, it...it 's just that..." Harry stammered.

"I saw your dreams. I saw your women." She reached back and ran her hands through her black hair, and they instantly transformed to fiery red. "Is this more pleasing?"

Harry was shocked. "How did you do that?"

"Magic."

"Obviously." Harry sighed. His chest felt tight, but it no longer hurt. "Hey, you healed me as well."

She nodded. "Caretakers are able healers," she said, tracing her fingers through Harry's hair seductively.

"Hey...stop that," he protested.

"But you like it!"

"That's not the point," Harry said. "It's been a while for me. Right now even Trelawney could excite me...well, maybe not Trelawney, but..."

"But the feeling you had in your dreams, about the girl with the red hair, you had this very pleasing feeling...I liked it...I want to experience it."

Harry had no idea what she was talking about. He didn't remember his dreams, and he knew two red-haired girls. So he decided to find out exactly what she meant. "First of all, how can you see my dreams?"

"It is something caretakers are capable of," she replied.

"Okay," Harry frowned, not completely satisfied with the answer. "...now about this feeling. I'm not sure what you're talking about. Was it love, or just lust?"

"Love...lust?" Harry could vaguely discern a troubled expression. "I do not understand. I was hoping you could explain these to me. Very few mortals ever come here. The ancient caretakers know these words, for they dwelt your realm but they could not explain them to me."

"So you're young?"

She nodded. "I am recent. I have only existed for one hundred of your solar cycles."

"Ah!" Harry sighed. "Well, to answer your question, first I have to find out who I've been dreaming about. This woman...did she have a large family, and brothers?"

The caretaker nodded enthusiastically. "Yes!" Then she frowned. "I felt a bad feeling when you thought about one of them."

'That would be Ron,' Harry thought, and sighed. "I imagine you did. Right then, the feeling you perceived was love, I think."

"It was nice, this love. Can you show me this love?"

Harry felt his face heat up. "No...and I think you're talking about lust and passion." He scratched his head. "How am I going to explain this to you? Many philosophers have spent a great deal of time pondering love. I'm only twenty years old, and I haven't experienced that much love. It isn't something I can explain quickly, and you just have to experience it to know it."

She nodded and straddled Harry. "Yes...show me."

Harry pushed her off with great difficulty. "No-no-no, this isn't love. It's called making love but...I can't show it to you just like that." He struggled to sit up. "Okay, let me begin by saying that love is one of the most carelessly and ill used words in history. I'm going to tell you about real love."

"There is false love, then?"

"I guess you could call it that." Harry sighed. "I'll start by talking about platonic love, all right?" He held up his hand to forestall the inevitable question. "It's non-romantic love." Again he held up his hand as she opened her mouth. "I'll explain what that is later!"

"Okay, you know...in nature, usually with mammals, but sometimes other animals as well, mothers fight to the death to protect their offspring?"

The caretaker looked at him questioningly. "Is that love?"

Harry shrugged. "Some argue that they do so to ensure the continued existence of their species. More precisely, their specific essence in the species," he said, trying to avoid the subject of genetics with a being as ignorant and innocent as this caretaker. "But wouldn't it be more logical for them to run away in the face of overwhelming odds, to live and breed another day?"

"Logical?"

Harry groaned. This was going to be tougher than he'd imagined. "I meant, doesn't it make more sense for the mother to abandon her children to spare her own life, and have more offspring later, than to risk her own life?"

The caretaker's eyes widened. "Ah, I see what you mean. So you say that their determination to defend their offspring is love?"

"I think so." Harry nodded. "And it goes further than that. In nature, some animals protect members of their group, even though they are not related...though this doesn't happen so often. But it does with humans. They care about people who are not their relatives."



"Now, some people protect people on a constant basis because that is what they do for a living. They call it duty, and usually this isn't love. They get paid gold, so they can purchase material goods. With real love, you can't expect anything in return. You just do it for other people's happiness."

"Including those unknown to you?"

Harry nodded.

"Why?"

"I don't know. I do it because I believe it's the right thing to do." He blushed. "But maybe in my case it isn't real love either...because deep down...I hope that if I work hard enough, and save enough lives, the people I love will forgive me. So there is a bit of selfishness there."

"You fight for love? Real love?"

"Yes, you could say that."

"But why? The people you love hurt you. Why do you want to love them still?" the caretaker asked. Judging from her tone Harry determined that she was utterly confused.

"Why love if losing hurts so much?" Harry shook his head. "I have no answer to that...only the life I've lived. And that life taught me not to give up on those I love...to always hope that someday they might forgive me."

The caretaker took a minute to let it sink in, before asking, "Why do you hope?"

"Hope is better than despair." Harry shrugged. "It's all that keeps me going."

"Going where?"

"I don't know." Harry sighed. "But we mortals have a saying; ' The journey of life isn't about reaching the destination, but about the journey itself. You see; the destination is death. But it is the life you lead that matters. Do you understand?"

The caretaker twirled her red hair between her fingers pensively. "I believe I understand some of it. So that is real love?"

"To tell you the truth, that doesn't even begin to describe it. But it's the best I could do on such short notice."

"But love...why do it if it hurts?" she asked again.

It was clear that that part had been hard for her to understand, and Harry chuckled. "It doesn't always hurt, or...only in my case does it hurt most of the time." He smiled ruefully. "But the fact that it hurts is a good thing, because only the people you love can truly hurt you, and it's good to know that I'm still capable of love. Voldemort wasn't so lucky though."

The caretaker nodded. "I saw him in your dreams too. Bad dreams."

"I still have those from time to time."

"The feeling you felt..."

"Hate?" Harry frowned. "Yes, I used to hate Voldemort for what he did, and what he almost made me. But I know I have only myself to blame for what I almost became, because ultimately it is the choices we make that form our character. As for what he did...he too was a victim of evil. I understand his father abandoned his mother because of what she was. He never knew love either, and for that I pity him, really.

"I would be lying if I told you I no longer feel hate towards him, and his memory. But I'm not perfect either. All I can do is try to improve myself."

"Ah!" The caretaker exclaimed. "So love is the opposite of hate?"

"I'm not sure," Harry admitted. "I wouldn't call it the opposite. All I know is that hate thrives in the absence of love."

The caretaker brought the bowl to his lips, and again he drank greedily, realising that he must have been dehydrated pretty badly.

The caretaker wiped the excess fluid off his chin. "Now tell me about that other love."

"I really can't," Harry said, embarrassed. "I really don't know much about that. Ginny is the only person I've ever loved that way. I'm hardly an expert on the matter."

"But no one else here can tell me. I want to know," the caretaker complained, sounding like a little girl.

"Okay, okay!" Harry grinned. "Okay, I have no close blood relatives who care about me, right? But that doesn't mean I don't have a family. My best friend's family took me in as one of their own, and loved me as if I were."

"Ginny is his younger sister, and I didn't really notice her the first four years I knew her. Then Ron and Hermione got together and had less time for me, so Ginny filled the gap they left, and I got to know her better. She became my best friend, in a way. She was always there for me."

"You loved her platonic!" the caretaker interrupted.

"Very good, yes, I loved her platonically," Harry smiled. "You really did understand. But then, in my sixth year, I saw her being chatted up by another bloke, and for some reason I felt like decking him. Nothing fancy, no magic, I just wanted to beat the living daylights out of him." said Harry, remembering the feeling vividly. "It turns out I was in love with her."

"In love?"

"Yes, romantic love," Harry explained. "You see, the feeling I felt was jealousy. A kind of anger if you see something you want, about to be

taken away from you. Actually, there is more to it than that, but I can't really explain. See, there is also envy, but that's different."

"You were in jealousy?"

Harry laughed. "I was jealous, yes! I realised then, that I loved her both romantically and platonically." He frowned as he finished the sentence. Could one love someone else both romantically and platonically, or were the two mutually exclusive? Maybe it had been neither. Maybe his love for Ginny transformed right then and there into some higher form of love. True love.... "Well, it took a couple of months actually...I was pretty dense," he continued. It was like finding a new and secret drawer in a cupboard you've had all your life. Like a bright blaze, kindled by an unexpected spark. It was like...powerful magic...the Cruciatus in reverse."

His face fell. "Then I realised that I couldn't tell her...make my feelings for her known. Because I knew Voldemort would make an extra effort to harm her if I did. He was already trying very hard to kill the Weasleys in particular, apart from his other opponents. Had I confessed my love and made it public, word would have reached Voldemort...it would have made things worse."

"And she ceased to love you when you harmed her brother," the caretaker summarised.

"How did you know?" Harry asked, surprised.

"I saw it in your dream," she said gloomily.

"Right, I forgot about that!" He smiled ruefully and slapped his forehead theatrically, trying to hide the mounting pain that was surging up from the depths of his soul. He'd tried to put his feelings for Ginny behind him for so long. It had been impossible, but he'd thought he'd managed to bury them deeper than this. Having to discuss them now was like tearing the scab off an old wound, and the pain was just as raw as when the wound had been fresh. Even worse, it felt like someone was prodding that reopened wound viciously. "So then I realised there was no use in telling her...even after I'd defeated Voldemort. I thought people would rejoice when that happened, and

they would forgive me, but their fear of Voldemort was replaced by a fear of me. I wanted to redeem myself, so I became an Auror. I worked hard and became the best. But they still didn't trust me, and they worked me harder than the others. I was angry with them at first, but I realised in time that anger and resentment had caused me to do the very thing that had got me into that mess. So I swallowed my pride and endured it. They nearly broke me. Then the Rangers contacted me. I'm glad they did...it saved me a lot of hurt."

"And you still love her...Ginny?"

"I would die a thousand horrible deaths for her, if that were possible. She's the only one for me. I tried to forget her, but I failed miserably. Even if she finds another, I'll still love her. I just want her to be happy.

"Even if you can't have her for yourself?" The caretaker frowned.

"It'll hurt, of course. I don't know how I'll feel if she marries another. If she does, my heart will never be mended, because she still holds half of it. I don't know who I'll be, then. But I guess I'll just have to get my strength from the fact that she's happy," he said, knowing it was a downright lie. When Ginny had told him she never wanted to see him again...it had been worse than anything he'd ever experienced before. Worse than anything Voldemort could have done with him. He was genuinely afraid that if Ginny gave her heart to another, his would be lost forever.

It was as if an icy hand had reached into his chest and had started squeezing it, and his hurt was nearly a physical pain. He closed his eyes in an effort to hold back his tears, but they streamed out under the tightly shut eyelids anyway.

The caretaker reached over and with surprising strength she pulled him towards her and cradled his head in her lap. She wiped his tears off his face, and as Harry opened his eyes again, a searing pain shot through his soul again for he was instantly reminded of Ginny at the sight of the fiery red locks that dangled across his face.

Strangely enough, all his emotional anguish drained away as she touched her hand to his forehead.

Before he had time to ponder exactly how she'd done this, a shadow fell across them, and as Harry looked he saw a stooping figure standing over them. A raven sat on his shoulder. "Good, you are awake."

"Are you a caretaker as well?"

"Yes." The figure nodded. "I was concerned. You were seriously injured when we found you. You have beaten the odds by surviving."

"It was that bad, huh?"

The figure, Harry recognised the blurry image as that of an old and bald man, nodded. "The armour you were wearing saved your life. I examined it...Graphorn hide?"

Harry nodded.

"It was dented in several places," the man continued. "You were very lucky."

"What about my wand, and my goggles?"

"They are being kept in my dwelling," the old caretaker said, and then frowned. "It is unusual for a wizard to carry two wands. I saw an eleven-inch phoenix tail feather and holly, and a fourteen-inch dragon heartstring and ironwood. Both powerful, but very different. They can't both belong to you."

"They don't," Harry said, and proceeded to explain what happened in India. "So I knew my only chance to escape the cave in was to jump into the underground river with a Bubble-Head Charm to allow me to breathe."

The caretaker smiled. "So you killed Hannibal Skaras. I thank you for that. He was a menace to both our realms. And there were many tunnels, you say?"

"They criss-crossed the entire area. I reckon the vampires used them to get around in daytime."

"Perhaps." The old caretaker frowned. "I think he was digging to find the portal. This realm holds magic items that could have given him the power of a higher deity."

"Wow, that hadn't occurred to me," Harry said, and brief silence blanketed them, before he asked, "How do I get out of this realm? Not that I don't enjoy your hospitality."

"You have to wait for a full solar eclipse in your realm. The sky will turn blue in this realm. That is how you see that it is time to go. Then you can simply Apparate back into your realm."

Harry quickly ran the numbers through his head. "But the next eclipse won't be until half way through next year...in June 2001. I can't wait that long! There must be another way out of here. There are portals into this realm. There must be one that leads out of this realm."

"There isn't. You will have to wait," the old caretaker said.

"But I thought there was..." the young female caretaker began, but a stern look from the old caretaker silenced her.

"Yes?" Harry asked eagerly. "There is another portal isn't there?" He looked at the old caretaker accusingly. "Why did you lie to me?"

"Because the exit portal is far away from here. It is hardly worth the journey, and it is in the middle of the Forest of Reflections. Merlin, Circe, Lituolone, Tecumseh, Rama, Yamato Take, Godric Gryffindor, Ivan Tsarevich and most recently, Pecos Bill; they all decided it was worth the wait after we told them what dangers would await them in the Forest of Reflections."

Harry could believe the names he was hearing. Had Godric Gryffindor been there? Pecos Bill was a wizard? He'd read about him in Tall Tales of the Wild West, one of Dudley's many untouched books that had sat on the shelves in his room in no. 4 Privet Drive. He shook his head. "I have to get back. Didn't anyone ever try to get to the portal?"

"Yes, and none of them survived. You will be assaulted by hordes of Red Caps, clans of trolls, swarms of flesh eating Doxies that will strip your bones clean," the old caretaker warned. "And those are just the lesser dangers. It will be like nothing you have ever faced before."

"I have to try!" Harry repeated stubbornly.

The young caretaker placed her small and soft hand on his shoulder. "No! You do not know what you are saying! Just wait for the eclipse," she pleaded.

Harry looked at her and was almost swayed by the genuine fear and worry in her voice. He also noticed that her hair had gone back to its normal colour.

"At least wait until you have your strength back," the elder caretaker proposed.

Harry thought about it. The warning sounded serious, and it was stupid to attempt this when he wasn't at his full strength. "All right then." He nodded. "In the meantime, can I at least get out of bed and explore this place. I might as well learn about it while I'm here."

The old caretaker nodded at the young caretaker. "She will show you around." He turned and walked away, but stopped and turned around again in the doorway of the dwelling. "And come to see me the day after tomorrow. She will show you how to find me. We have some things to discuss," he said, before walking out of the dwelling.

"Tomorrow!" The young caretaker said carefully, as if tasting food for the first time. "That means after the next sunrise, right?"

"Yes, it does." Harry nodded.

She sighed happily. "It is nice that you are here. I can learn so much from you."

"I reckon I can learn much more from you," Harry said. "After all, you're five times older than me."



She laughed melodiously. "Perhaps! But come." She helped him up. "I will show you around."

"I need my wand," Harry said. "I have to perform an Oculus Reparus charm to restore my eyesight." He knew it wouldn't last half as long as it would if done by an expert, and that he wouldn't have 20/20 vision, but anything would be better than his current eyesight.

She nodded, and from the corner of his eye Harry saw a raven take off. "He will fetch your wand for you," she explained.

"So you use ravens to carry messages and the like?" Harry asked, guessing that ravens fulfilled the role that owls did in a large part of the wizarding world.

She shook her head. "Time has no meaning here, so we are never in haste. If we need something, we always go in person. I am sending him instead because I do not want to leave you alone."

"I'm not a little baby, you know," Harry said irritably. As he said that, his legs trembled under his own weight and he had to lean onto the caretaker. He blushed. "Then again, I see your point."

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Two days later, the raven guided Harry to where the old caretaker lived. The caretaker of wildflowers told him that the old caretaker was called the caretaker of the winds, and that he lived on an island in the sky. The raven would take Harry to a Hippogriff, who would fly him up there.

After a one-hour walk at a leisurely pace, they arrived on a hilltop where a magnificent black Hippogriff awaited Harry. He bowed to the creature, and awaited its reply. It took a while, for the creature eyed him with some disdain, but it finally bowed back, and Harry moved closer. The Hippogriff bent down to allow him easier access, and Harry saw that a saddle had been strapped to its back, and that two handles were added to the front of the saddle. He guessed that these

additions allowed the rider a better grip than he'd otherwise get on the slick feathers of the beast's neck.

The creature took off after Harry had gotten a good grip, and it flew higher and higher, through the yellow clouds. In the distance, Harry discerned what looked like five Griffins flying in a V formation. He couldn't be sure, because he hadn't been able to fix his eyes completely, partly because the charm in question wasn't his speciality. But there was another reason that had him worried. His own wand wasn't terribly reliable in this place, and Wolfe's wand didn't work for him at all. It was as if some current in the realm interfered with the focussing properties of the wand.

They banked around a cloud and suddenly a floating island came into view. He saw the stooping figure of the caretaker of the winds waiting for him. The Hippogriff landed near the caretaker, and Harry carefully dismounted. He felt strangely drained after the journey, and realised that it would take a while before he would recover completely.

The caretaker walked over to him and steadied him with a surprisingly strong grip.

"Thanks." Harry mumbled, a bit embarrassed by his weakened state.

"Don't mention it." The caretaker said. "It has been a while since I had a conversation with a mortal. You can tell me all about recent developments. Pecos Bill told me about the steam engine. Fascinating really, what non-magical folk can think of. A pity that most of their antics harm nature."

Harry told him about recent developments and Muggle technology, and the Internet especially intrigued the caretaker. Harry didn't know too much about that, since the Internet became had become widespread after he went to Hogwarts, but he explained it as best he could, and the caretaker listened, intrigued. "So e-mails are much faster than owls, but e-mails can't find people like owls can," Harry summarised.

"Fascinating." The caretaker nodded, reminding Harry very much of Arthur Weasley and a pang of hurt flashed through his heart as the memory touched his mind.

"You miss your family, don't you? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry, but you were very transparent." The caretaker frowned.

"That's okay." Harry sighed. He had got used to it with the other caretaker, and he didn't really mind much anymore.

"I know someone who may be able to ease your mind. I will ask Windbeak to fly you down to where the caretaker of the ponds dwells. He is an excellent counsellor."

"I think I'll go see him then." Harry nodded. "But I've been meaning to ask you something."

"You may ask." The caretaker smiled.

"Well...Merlin, and Yamato Take and Rama and Gryffindor...they've been here?".

The caretaker nodded. "Yes, they have."

Harry was deeply awed by all the great names. "Amazing. Who would have thought..." He shook his head. "The only difference between them and me is that they probably came here by choice."

"And they had enough sense to heed our warnings," the caretaker added.

"Oh, quit it already," Harry said, annoyed.

"You still want to go, don't you?" The caretaker shook his head. "Did you not notice that your wand is nearly useless here? You cannot count on it to work at all times."

"I'll just have to be really careful then." Harry shrugged and got up. "I think I'll go find that other caretaker now. Does he like unexpected visitors?"

"He is expecting you," the caretaker said.

"How? You just suggested that I go see him, and you don't have a fire-connection or some other form of communication. Or are all you caretakers telepathic?"

The caretaker laughed. "I didn't mean that he knows you are coming now. I meant he knew you'd be visiting him eventually."

Harry grinned sheepishly. "Oh!"

So he mounted the Hippogriff and enjoyed the view as it flew him to wherever this caretaker lived. He recognised the small hill covered by wildflowers, which was where the caretaker of wildflowers lived, and he saw her tiny figure look up and wave at him. He didn't dare take one of his hands off the handles to wave back, so he just hoped she wouldn't be offended by a lack of response. He knew his fear of falling was quite ludicrous, but a Hippogriff wasn't a broom, so he decided it was better to be safe than sorry.

Half an hour later they were soaring over plains covered by tall grass, and they started losing altitude quickly.

This had to be the place, Harry thought, as he jumped off the Hippogriff. A pond surrounded by tall grass.

The pond was still, and reflected the purple sky, giving it an eerie look. Harry frowned and wondered how this caretaker would be able to help him.

The caretaker seemingly appeared out of nowhere and walked up to him through the tall grass. "On such a beautiful day, it must be difficult to stay so serious," he said, probably having noticed the look on Harry's face.

"Is it?" Harry frowned.

Watching the pond intently, the caretaker continued to walk. "Join me if you like." The caretaker walked to the edge of the still pond, framed

by tall, willow-like trees, their leaves golden orange and fruits silvery white. "Please sit down," the caretaker invited, patting the ground next to him. Looking carefully before sitting, Harry brushed the ground to clear some leaves and make a space for himself.

"Now, find a small stone, please," the caretaker instructed.

"What?"

"A stone. Please find a small stone and throw it in the pond."

Searching around him, Harry grabbed a pebble and threw it as far as he could.

"Tell me what you see," the caretaker instructed.

Straining his imperfect eyes to not miss a single detail, Harry looked at the water's surface. He didn't know what he was supposed to see, so he opted just to say what he saw. "I see ripples."

"Where did the ripples come from?"

"From the pebble I threw in the pond."

"Please reach your hand into the water and stop the ripples," the caretaker asked.

Not understanding, Harry stuck his hand in the water as a ripple neared, only to cause more ripples. Harry was now completely baffled. Where was this going? Puzzled, the young man waited.

"Were you able to stop the ripples with your hands?" the caretaker asked.

"No, of course not."

"Could you have stopped the ripples, then?"

"No, I told you I only caused more ripples."

"What if you had stopped the pebble from entering the water to begin with?" The caretaker smiled such a beautiful smile; Harry couldn't be upset anymore. "Next time you are unhappy with your life, catch the stone before it hits the water. Do not spend time trying to undo what you have done. That is impossible. Rather, change what you are going to do before you do it." The caretaker looked kindly upon the young man.

"But caretaker, how will I know what I am going to do before I do it?"

"Take the responsibility for living your own life. If you're working with a doctor to treat an illness, then ask the doctor to help you understand what caused the illness. Do not just treat the ripples. Keep asking questions."

Harry sighed, his mind reeling. "Are you saying that I know the answers?"

"You may not know the answers right now, but if you ask the right questions, then you shall discover the answers."

"But what are the right questions, caretaker?"

"There are no wrong questions, only unasked ones. We must ask, for without asking, we cannot receive answers. But it is your responsibility to ask. No one else can do that for you."

Harry nodded and reflected on the caretaker's words, eyeing him curiously. He had a long white beard, and reminded Harry of Albus Dumbledore a bit.

"Did you understand what I explained just now?"

Harry nodded. Ron was like the pond, only instead of a pebble falling into it, a boulder weighing several tonnes had plunged in, not only causing ripples, but making the pond go dark with mud stirred from the bottom. It would take a long time for the water to become clear again, and the mud stirred up from the bottom by the huge impact, to settle down, and in a meantime there was nothing Harry could do about it.

"My reflection in the pond is the way my friend perceives me. The pond is like his soul...ravaged. There isn't anything I can do, is there?"

"Your friend must choose to forgive you."

"So what...are you saying that becoming a Ranger wasn't the right thing to do?"

"On the contrary. It kept you from throwing more pebbles."

"You think the others will forgive me?"

"What do you think?"

Harry shrugged and looked at the pond. "I reckon they might, now that you've given me this perspective on things."

The caretaker laughed. "It wasn't I who gave you this perspective, I just made you realise that you had it all along."

The strange answer prompted Harry to look at the caretaker, only to find that he had disappeared, making him wonder whether it had been a caretaker, or some powerful kind of mirror realm magic that animated and gave tangible shape to his own thoughts.

Three months passed, and Harry was as good as new. He suspected he might even be a little better. That potion the caretakers gave him induced vitality previously alien to him. And the caretakers hadn't only healed his body, but they had done their best to heal his mind as well.

He looked at the pretty caretaker of wildflowers, whom he had named Carey. She had wanted a name very badly, so he'd indulged her. She was curiously examining his magical Vision Enhancement Goggles.

"It is time for me to leave."

She didn't look up.

He knew it was because she was angry with him. She didn't want him to leave, and he suspected it was because she had developed feelings for him. He felt terrible, because it was entirely his fault. He shouldn't have given in to her when she kept asking him to show her more aspects of love. He should have resisted... he should have been strong. But he was only twenty years old, and not out of the uncontrollable hormone realm yet. It was Heidi all over again. He had taken advantage of a woman, again! But there was no harm done...right? And it wasn't as if he seduced her or anything...

He cursed himself. It was his fault! He couldn't try to rationalise it away. He shouldn't have slept with her...he should have had the foresight to predict the inevitable consequences of his actions. Because he didn't just sleep with her once, but over a dozen times over the last month. She had wanted him to, and she sure seemed to enjoy earthly pleasures, but he still should have refused. Now he had to deal with this, and he wasn't entirely unaffected by her hurt.

"You are abandoning me," she said tonelessly.

"I already told you..." Harry began, but her pained expression cut him off.

She crossed her arms. "Go then. I will tell the others you've left."

Not daring to meet her gaze, Harry took his goggles and placed them into his pouch. Then he donned his armour, and jammed Wolfe's wand into the special holster, next to his own wand.

He grabbed a bag Carey had made him. It was filled with food and drink that would sustain him on his journey, and miraculum weed, a weed that had become extinct in the earthly realm about 500 BC. If he brought that weed back Concordia, the botanists might be able to replant and grow it, and many people would be cured from previously incurable afflictions. Lilia had once told him that Wolfsbane potion was more of a rediscovery than a genuinely new discovery. She had read about it in an ancient scroll that contained many cures for all kinds of afflictions. Apparently, Carthaginian wizards had discovered Wolfsbane potion, and if miraculum weed was added to it, it would boost the potency so much that it could permanently cure a person



bitten by a werewolf, provided that it was administered to him before the rise of the next full moon. So if someone was bitten, he or she had a whole lunar cycle to drink the potion and stood an excellent chance of being cured permanently. It wouldn't do Remus any good in that respect, but many others could be saved with it. And it also served to boost the potency of other restorative potions, so the potency of all kinds of magical medicines would be boosted.

Harry held the bag tightly, aware of its precious cargo. He couldn't lose that bag no matter what. He glanced at Carey one more time. "I won't forget you!"

She just turned away from him, silently crying. Harry turned and started his trek towards the hazardous Forest of Reflections.

\*

Carey glanced over her shoulder and beheld his retreating form. She understood now, how love and pain were linked. "Goodbye Harry. Part of me will forever be yours," she sniffed quietly.

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## Grim Reality, Truth and Perception

### Chapter 8

It was getting a bit chilly in Nomad Island, this time of year. But it wasn't as cold as it used to be at Hogwarts, somewhere in Scotland. She could really get used to this type of weather. It wasn't too hot either, like Eldorado had been.

All Hermione needed to stay warm was her cloak. Under it she wore a chemise and bodice, like the local women did. She was strolling through Ruby Avenue, which was the major street through the Northern Quadrant of the fourth tier of the city, and linked Emerald Ave in the Eastern Quadrant with Topaz Ave in the Western Quadrant. Most of the popular retail shops were located on the fourth tier, and relative few people lived there.

"Shopping for my Christmas present?" a familiar voice asked.

Hermione recognised the voice behind her immediately. "Padma! It's been ages!" she beamed.

"Three whole weeks!" Padma nodded. "And there I thought we were becoming friends."

"Sorry. They've been working me really hard at the Citadel. Remember they gave me a choice what kind of job I could do? Well, I couldn't really choose, so I decided to do both."

"Typical!" Padma said teasingly. "So, do you read my column?"

Hermione nodded. "From time to time. I never thought you'd become a high-society columnist."

The other woman shrugged apologetically. "This city has an appallingly low crime rate. Well, there is the unofficial Thieves' Fellowship but they are way too secretive and there was no way to uncover that organisation. Besides that, there just isn't any action, and since our previous society columnist retired, I took the job. I like it. It's a good chance to meet a lot of interesting people."

"Ah, you must be referring to the unmarried males among the local nobility," Hermione teased in turn.

Padma grimaced. "Ugh! Those creeps? Nah! This may sound lame, but they're a bunch of pampered dilettantes. I want a real man! Like...Ranger Bill Quist...he's pretty hot, or Ranger Max Wolfe. I think I just like men in uniform," she said dreamily and giggled, once again reminding Hermione how very much alike Parvati and Padma were, despite Padma's constant claims that she was nothing like her airhead twin sister. "How is Wolfe, by the way?"

"Don't have a clue, and I don't really care," Hermione said icily. "I haven't seen him in a month. He's out on a tour of duty with Kozminski, Mordecai, Wortelgraaf and Izzet. I really don't understand what's so great about him. His attitude is awful. He never had anything nice to say to me back in September before he went out again. Almost like he doesn't think I'm good enough to work with him."

"Is he a male chauvinistic pig?" Padma asked eagerly, drawing out her notebook.

"Put that thing away, Padma," Hermione said warningly. "No, I don't think he's an MCP. He's just so arrogant and impossible. He needs to get his head checked. I really don't think he's all there," she said, tapping her forehead.

Padma laughed. "I see. Hey, do want to go grab a bite to eat?" She checked her watch. "I have about an hour and a half before I have to go back to work. The Metallurgists' Fellowship is presenting a revolutionary new type of transmutation magic. I have to cover that."

"Sure. Shall we go to one of the fancy places you frequent, or shall I take you down to The Barrel. I'm supposed to meet the girls there anyway."

"Oh, well, won't I be intruding?"

"Not at all!" Hermione reassured her. "Some of them are bringing some non-Ranger friends. Come on...let me show you off."

"All right." Padma said cheerfully and they started walking. "Will Lilia be there?"

Hermione shook her head. "She's out on a mission too. Not with Wolfe and his merry band of reprobates, thank goodness."

Padma laughed. "Really, what do you have against him?"

So Hermione told her about a training mission she'd gone on a month ago. When she'd asked him if he had any tips for her, he'd said to stay out of his way so he wouldn't hex her. "Can you believe him?" she huffed. "And instead of sticking up for me, the others just laughed."

"I think he's giving you a hard time because you're new."

"I hope that's all there is to it." Hermione sighed.

They took the scenic route through the city instead of taking a portal, and they talked about work, men, and shopping and Hermione was quite enjoying the brief change of pace Padma offered in her life. It was good to talk to a non-Ranger from time to time.

They finally reached Parcelsus Alley, where The Barrel was located and Hermione went in before Padma. She greeted Borin, a dwarf bartender, and Holly, the elf waitress and introduced them to Padma. Then they walked over to the long table the Rangers usually sat at. Ten chattering ladies occupied it.

"Hello Hermione!" an older woman greeted them. "Oh, you're Padma Patil! I am a big fan of yours! I liked your coverage of the new winter fashion show last week. I'm Serafina Esposito. Ranger Fourth class."

"Serafina used to be a medic. She came out of retirement to help out. Thanks to her, Lieutenant Montoya has been freed up to go on missions," Hermione clarified.

"How do you do." Padma nodded as she shook hands.

"Ladies, this is a friend of mine from Hogwarts, Padma Patil. Padma, meet Noelani Winters, Emily Yang, Claire Cruz, Clara Da Silva, Galatea Angelou, Helga Olsen, Emra Izzet, Elena Ironheart and Esther Mordecai." While Padma shook everybody's hand, Hermione elaborated. "Emra and Esther are Ranger wives and Elena is Commander Ironheart's youngest daughter. Serafina and Galatea are medics and Noelani, Emily and Clara are analysts with our Intel division. Helga," Hermione pointed to a seven feet and six inches tall quarter giant woman. "...is an Artificer, so she's responsible for the magical vehicles we use, among other things...and last but not least, Claire is our Politician. She's one of our spokespeople...our face to the outside world, our liaison with the Ministries of Magic..."

"That's enough, Hermione," the woman in question interrupted, smiling. "Have a seat."

Hermione and Padma sat down, and for the next hour they had a ball, talking and gossiping about the goings on in the city.

Padma was bombarded with questions about upcoming fashion shows, since it had become common knowledge among the city's females that Padma Patil had access to such information way before the average Concordian female.

While Padma was being kept busy, Hermione joined a conversation between Galatea, Emra Izzet and Esther Mordecai, who was giving Emra some tips on motherhood.

Hermione hadn't known that she was expecting, and she wasn't showing any signs of pregnancy yet. "When will the baby be along?" she asked.

"In August," the Turkish witch replied. "I only found out I was pregnant yesterday. Okan doesn't know yet. No use in writing a letter, since he'll be back later today!" she said excitedly. "I can't wait to see the look on his face!"

Hermione smiled. Emra was her age, and fifteen years younger than her husband, and everybody knew of his desire to have children. So despite the fact that he'd laughed at Wolfe's remark about not getting in the way, she was very happy for him.

"Commander Ironheart, sir?" Hermione heard Holly's high-pitched voice squeal. "So nice to see you."

She turned her head and saw the Commander give the elf a small nod, and his gaze swept over the room and came to rest on their table. Hermione's gut went cold as she saw the look in his eyes.

The Commander seemed to be carrying a huge weight as he dragged his feet over the floor and towards their table.

"Papa? What's the matter?" Elena asked.

Esther Mordecai went deathly pale. No doubt she had witnessed a similar situation before. "Caleb?" she squeaked.

The Ranger slowly shook his head and looked at the woman sitting next to her. "I'm so sorry!"

Emra started sobbing wildly and shaking all over, and Serafina shot over to help her. "Galatea, help me, she's going into shock. She may lose the baby."

Galatea snapped out of her trance and hurried around the table, and Hermione jumped into action as well, whipping out a Port Key to the Citadel she carried just in case. She tapped her wand against it and said, "Citadel medical wing." The Port Key started glowing. Then she grabbed onto the ailing woman. "Transport!" The world blurred around her and seconds later she was in the Medical ward at the citadel. Two civilian nurses, who worked in their medical ward, looked up from a potions' cauldron in surprise.

"Help me!" Hermione barked, and one of the nurses summoned a stretcher on which they put the woman. She turned to the other nurse.

"I want a dreamless-sleeping potion. This girl is pregnant, so dilute it a bit. And get Captain Sharif over here, on the double!"

The nurse nodded and hurried off to a communications mirror, a device used instead of fires, in the Citadel, and much of Concordia.

Hermione took a vial brought by the other nurse, and administered its contents intravenously. Emra relaxed visibly, and her breathing became even. They levitated the stretcher to a room, and they transferred the woman onto the bed. Then Captain Sharif's telltale clonking footstep sounded in the corridor outside the room, and the ageing doctor walked in.

"I take it she heard about her husband?" he groaned, as he saw whom the emergency was about.

"Yes, Captain. She went into shock, but she's pregnant, so I thought it was best to get her here as soon as possible. Luckily I had my emergency Port Key with me."

"Good thing you did!" the old man said, as he donned a set of magical goggles that allowed him to examine internal injuries. "It seems that the foetus is unharmed," he continued, as he took off his goggles. "The question is...how will she cope when she comes to? When can't keep her asleep indefinitely!"

"Galatea can counsel her," Hermione offered.

"I don't think so," Sharif said wearily. "Not after she receives the news..." The old man sighed, suddenly looking very tired. "Ranger Mordecai didn't go into details, but it seems that Ranger Izzet's death affected Ranger Wolfe quite badly. He's catatonic. Pawel tried to get him out of it, but nothing seems to help."

"Ranger Kozminski is very capable, I'm sure he can help Wolfe."

The Egyptian Captain shook his shiny bald head. "I don't think so, it sounded very serious."

At that moment, Galatea and Serafina rushed into the room. "Is she...?"

"She is okay, and her child is fine," Sharif said. He looked at Serafina. "Please stay here and monitor her."

Serafina nodded.

Then Sharif looked at Hermione and Galatea. "Accompany me to my office. There is something I must tell you both."

Sharif's office wasn't far, and it was the largest office in the medical wing. He opened the door and held it open for the ladies to precede him in. He followed them in and gestured for them to take one of three plush armchairs in front of his large desk, and sat down in his high backed chair. He looked at Galatea. "Wolfe took Okan's death very hard. His mind couldn't handle it, and Pawel says Wolfe's condition is like nothing he's ever seen before. From what he told me, I'm not sure there is anything we can do for him. It seems he has erected his own magical cocoon around his mind, they way Cruciatus Curse victims sometimes do."

"But he wasn't tortured!" Hermione said, for Galatea's benefit.

Sharif shook his head. "No. Like I said, it all sounded very strange. I can always rely on Aurelia for help. She's the best in the field of emotional trauma."

Aurelia was the Chief Mediwitch at the Concordian House of Healing, and there were few mediwizards out there who were more skilled than she was, Hermione knew. "Captain, I'd like to help," she offered. She felt awful for jumping to all those conclusions about Wolfe. She looked at Galatea, and then back at the Captain. "I was wondering if you could arrange for me to be transferred permanently to the Medical division. I'm needed here, and since I'm already a licensed mediwitch, I don't need to be trained in that aspect. "I'll have more time on my hands to deal with this problem."

"Are you going to find a cure?" Sharif asked.



"I'm going to try my best, Captain."

Sharif gave her a small smile. "Irina won't like this. She thought you showed great promise...but I think something can be arranged."

"I'll help you!" Galatea said quietly.

Sharif nodded. "If anyone can get Wolfe out of his mental state, it is you."

Galatea smiled sadly. "I don't see how. He kept me at arm's length too, same as everyone else. In fact, he's become a bit nastier recently."

A thought struck Hermione like lightning. "Actually, maybe he just did that because you were starting to grow on him."

"Excellent insight, Ranger Granger."

Hermione blushed. "I'm not a Ranger yet, officially, and Ranger Granger sounds silly."

"You really think he...likes me?" Galatea asked, blinking her tearful eyes.

"Well, I can't be sure," Hermione began uncertainly. "But you're a beautiful woman, and you've been very nice to him for...how long?"

"Two years."

"Two years. He's only human, you know! He is bound to like you, a little!" Hermione smiled reassuringly.

"I concur," Sharif said. "You should try to get through to Wolfe. Serafina is a more than capable of taking care of Okan's wife...widow." The Egyptian shook his bald head in sorrow.

Hermione looked thoughtful. "I'll need to know everything about his life, though, if I'm to understand what could have caused this. It is possible that this is purely psychological."

"That might actually be the case." Sharif said, a look of sudden comprehension appearing in his eyes. "You see, I had Wolfe watched...by his peers...yes! It started after Potter died. I think Wolfe felt indebted to him for saving his life, and tried to fill his shoes, putting tremendous pressure on himself. He's very powerful, nearly as powerful as Potter was. Caleb told me he did some crazy and brilliant things and ended up saving Ranger Wortelgraaf's life, who otherwise would probably be dead too. But he lost it when he realised that Okan was dead. Caleb told me that he tried to shake Okan's body awake, as if he were merely asleep. When Okan didn't respond, he just slipped away. It still doesn't explain the magical barrier in his mind, but maybe it portrays the root of the problem. I'll see what I can do with regards to his history. He doesn't have many living relatives, and he never let any other Rangers get too close."

"I'm sure I can help you there," a grave voice sighed tiredly.

Sharif started getting up to salute, but the person waved him off, and beckoned the women to stay seated as well.

Commander Ironheart looked at Galatea and Hermione. "Please, come up to my office in an hour. I know more about the kid than any other person in Concordia."

"Yes Commander." The two young women nodded.

"How is Mrs Izzet?" he asked Sharif wearily.

"Asleep, for now. Serafina is looking after her," the Egyptian answered.

Ironheart exhaled in relief. "I heard she was pregnant."

"You heard correctly, Commander." Sharif nodded sadly.

Ironheart shook his head and retreated out from the office.

An hour later, Galatea and Hermione stood outside the office in the tallest tower of the Citadel. Galatea knocked on the door, and it swished open, allowing the two women in.

Ironheart sat behind his desk, out of uniform, wearing a billowy sleeved green renaissance shirt with a wide v neckline that was neatly laced up. Over it he wore a leather vest, and as he stood up in a gentlemanly fashion as the ladies entered the room, Hermione saw he wore black cotton slacks. The Commander looked good even out of uniform.

The women were offered some refreshments as they sat down, but they both declined. "Mind if I pour myself one then? I really need it."

"Not at all!" Hermione answered, as she looked around and observed the many fascinating trinkets in Ironheart's collection.

Ironheart pulled open a drawer in his desk and pulled out a can of Coca-Cola and a bottle of Bacardi.

Hermione pursed her mouth and frowned. As far as she knew, Muggle products were banned from the Concordian market and weren't even allowed into the city. She asked cautiously, "Sir...isn't that...forbidden?"

Ironheart chuckled. "Officially, it is! But the Lord Mayor also loves the Cuba Libre. Why...you're going to turn me in?"

"Of course not." Hermione blushed.

Ironheart laughed and winked, causing both women to blush profusely, and Hermione could see how many witches came to be smitten with him. The man just oozed a certain magnetic sort of charm, augmenting his considerably handsome looks. The he took a sip from his drink, and savoured it, before swallowing it down. He sighed. "You both are wondering how it is I know so much about Maximilian, eh?"

The women nodded.

"Well, I'll cut right to the chase." Avery Wolfe, Max' father, was my son. Max is my grandson."

Hermione forgot to breathe, and she saw that Galatea's big blue eyes had widened as well. Then she realised there were many similarities between the two men. Wolfe had a darker complexion, eyes and a wavier hair type, but they had the same height, build and jaw-line. They also resembled each other at the eyes and nose, and Hermione kicked herself mentally for not noticing, even though she never had any reason to look for these similarities.

Ironheart's penetrating gaze made it seem as if he were trying to read her thoughts. "He does look like me, doesn't he?"

Hermione squirmed in her chair. "In retrospect, I noticed some similarities, sir." She was now convinced that Ironheart was one of those wizards that could read the surface thoughts of other people.

He nodded and smiled. "Yes, I am a mind-reader. In my youth, I used this ability to great effect when trying to pick up girls. It got me in a lot of trouble too. A Creole Cajun witch by the name of Tempeste Louvel was one of those troubles. I was about to marry my wife when I found that she was pregnant with Avery. A good friend of mine, Scott Wolfe, did the decent thing in my stead, and married her and cared for her and her son, raising the boy as his own. Avery looked like his mother, so no one was the wiser.

"Max didn't have a normal childhood," Ironheart continued. "He was raised to become a weapon, not a person. He was raised to reject all emotion. Why? Because it would interfere with his development.

"Max' great-grandfather discovered that the Chi-gong technique the oriental Muggles use to strengthen their energy, could be used to stir the magic within, and facilitate the use of wand-less magic. It is like transferring potion from one cauldron into a smaller one, so the potion reaches the brim of the cauldron, and a dipper to scoop out the potion isn't needed. The wand, normally functions like a dipper..." the old Ranger said, explaining his metaphor.

"But the cauldron can boil over that much more easily," Hermione interrupted, getting the picture. She knew that spontaneous magic happened when a wizard was angry, upset or happy! "That's why he was taught to reject emotions...that's why he's such a prat I mean err..." She sneaked a glance at Galatea, but the white-haired beauty was cradling her face in her hands, shaking slightly. "Sorry, that came out wrong...but I see what you're saying, Commander."

"You understand, then." Ironheart nodded.

"I think I do."

"Good." The old Ranger nodded. "And I trust you'll do everything in your ability to save Max?" he asked, looking at Hermione and the tearful Galatea in turn.

"I'll still need to know more, but I think I can give you a theory on what happened, Commander."

"Please enlighten me." Ironheart nodded and looked intently at Hermione, making her very nervous.

"Well, I imagine his upbringing must have been very err, disciplined?"

"Brutal is a better word," Ironheart said quietly. "He was taught that play was a waste of time. His Kung-fu training started at age four, and his magical training started when he was six. Lei forbade him to even see other children, anticipating that Max would become aware of the unfairness of the whole situation and rebel. It's a good thing that he spent a couple of months at his grandmother's every year. It did him a lot of good!" Ironheart shook his head. "I should have stepped in, taken him away from Lei, but I couldn't, out of respect for him. He saved my life when we went after Skaras to imprison him, and I owed him for that. Besides, I don't know if my wife would have taken it very well. She's very much the jealous type."

Galatea, who had been listening quietly the whole time, suddenly spoke up. "He told me about his childhood. He loved his grandmother, but when he talked about his great-grandfather, I only sensed fear

and respect. I think he believed that his grandfather did it all for the greater good."

Ironheart nodded. "His sense of duty is great."

"Just as I thought," Hermione said. "I think his basic human nature collided with his great grandfather's doctrine. That, coupled with the negative emotions he must have been experiencing, rendered him catatonic. I still can't explain the magical barrier, but I think that has something to do with his wand-less magic training. Basically, I think he lost control of his magic."

"It makes sense." Ironheart frowned thoughtfully. "I'll tell Aurelia about your theory. I think she will be contacting you very soon."

Aurelia indeed contacted Hermione after she'd heard Hermione's theory, and she agreed with it completely. Now, nine days later, it was Christmas Eve, and a bleary-eyed Hermione was reading about a few ancient restorative draughts, and several others were bubbling in their cauldrons. They had already tried two potions, but neither had worked.

Pawel Kozminski, a Polish Ranger Fourth Class medic, brought her a cup of hot chocolate. "You've done all you could for today, Hermione."

Hermione shook her head. "I'm overlooking something...I have to be overlooking something."

He gently took the parchments away from her and rolled them up. "You've been awake for sixty hours. Your mind is not getting any sharper because of it. Please, go rest a little. Where are your notes? I will pick up where you left off."

Hermione grabbed her mug of chocolate and slid off the stool she'd been sitting on. She pointed to a stack of parchments on which she'd scribbled down notes. "There they are." She rubbed her eyes. "Aren't you going up for the Christmas dinner?"

"I'm not really in the mood."

Hermione yawned and nodded. "Neither am I. Happy Christmas Pawel."

"You too, Hermione."

As Hermione made her way out of the Medical wing, she paused at the door of the room in which Wolfe lay, now having slipped into a coma, and she heard Galatea singing to him softly. She remembered how Ginny had guarded and comforted Harry at night in their sixth year, when Voldemort attacked him through his dreams. Such devotion!

She tore herself away from the door and continued to her room, mutely nodding to several Rangers who wished her a merry Christmas.

She reached her corridor, and was mildly shocked by Helga shoving her tongue down Nathan Kelly's throat, while she held up a sprig of mistletoe over their heads.

She smiled. Nathan was very tall, but Helga was the one who had to bend down, still being ten inches taller. They made a very cute couple in a bizarre sort of way, and Hermione found herself wondering how to explain the existence of Half Giants. Helga already had to bend down to kiss Nathan and she was only a quarter giant...how would a twenty-foot being, interact with a human? The sheer mechanics of it were mind-boggling.

There was also a peculiar feeling in the pit of her stomach as she watched them kiss. She couldn't quite place it...it wasn't jealousy, for she had no romantic yearnings for Nathaniel Kelly. No...it was something different. Envy, that was it!

She cleared her throat loudly, and she heard their lips smacking softly as they quickly pulled away. "Happy Christmas. How long has this been going on?" she asked. She actually already knew, since Helga had told her all about it, but she had to act naturally, and the natural thing to do was to ask.

"What are you talking about?" Nathan replied trying to keep his tone steady.

"Come on, that wasn't a mistletoe kiss." Hermione grinned. "Relax, I won't tell anyone."

Nathan looked visibly relieved, but Helga was quite upset by his relief at Hermione's remark. "Are you ashamed of me? she whimpered. "It's because I'm part giant, isn't it!" she said, with tears streaming down her large pink cheeks. She ran to her room at the end of the corridor and slammed the door shut behind her.

Hermione fixed Nathan with a withering glare. "You snog her, but you're ashamed of her? Nathan, how could you!"

He looked at the floor in shame. "I...didn't mean to. It...it's just that my family...they won't understand."

"Do you love her?"

"I...I've liked her ever since I first saw her, when I first arrived. I...I've hurt her feelings, what am I going to do? I think I really love her."

"If you do, scream it from the rooftops," Hermione said. "Go public. That should allay any fears she has."

Nathan's eyes gleamed. "Brilliant! Thanks, Hermione, Merry Christmas!" he said, as he stormed off.

Shaking her head, Hermione entered her room and closed the door behind her and was promptly greeted by Crookshanks, who jumped into her arms, purring contentedly. "Hey Crookshanks, my gorgeous baby!" she said in falsetto tones. "Have you been a good boy? Yes you have...yes you have!" She stroked him and he moved his head to meet her strokes. She sighed pathetically. At least she had Crookshanks' unconditional love.

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It was good to see the old castle again! In mere days, it would empty itself as the vast majority of the students went home for the Christmas holidays.

Before heading up the castle, Draco went to the Whomping Willow, which wasn't far from where the monument honouring Potter stood. He bowed his head, in a show of respect. After all, he needed to do everything in his power to convince them that he was indeed a reformed person.

He stayed there for a few minutes before finally walking to the castle. He passed several students who were playing in the snow and received looks of pure loathing from a handful of seventh year Gryffindors.

It was lunchtime, so he headed straight towards the Great Hall where he would no doubt find McGonagall, or someone who could point him in the right direction. His mind was working overtime to think of a way to maximise his advantage.

Many students turned to look at him as he entered the room. He had even adopted a different, more reserved walk, instead of his usual swagger. Severus Snape observed him with narrowed eyes, and McGonagall rose from her seat and walked around the teacher's table to meet him.

"Welcome back to Hogwarts, Mr Malfoy," she said coolly.

"I can't honestly say it is good to be back," he said sadly, and loudly enough so most of the teachers could hear him. "It reminds me of who I was." He paused and forced himself not to smile too brightly at his own deviousness, making it look as if he were forcing a smile onto his face. "Hopefully, my being here will earn me part of the redemption I seek. Could you please summon Dobby and Winky for me, Professor?"

McGonagall sent Filch to fetch Dobby in the kitchens, and Ginny Weasley went for Winky in the hospital wing. Minutes later, both elves appeared in the great hall, Dobby fearfully eyeing his former master.

Draco opened his briefcase and took out a piece of parchment, and went down on one knee to offer it to Dobby and Winky. "I got your request in September, and I decided to personally see it done, since it could have taken over a year for things to get done if I'd let things run their bureaucratic course. I know this doesn't begin to make up for all the terrible things we put you through, but..." He injected emotion into his voice and made it waver a bit.

He shook his head. "Well, I can hardly expect you to forgive me. I'd better go now." He closed his briefcase and got up again. To his satisfaction, he noticed everyone was looking at him thunderstruck. He had at least a hundred witnesses who saw his noble action...including Ginny Weasley.

Snape was looking unconvinced, and Lupin was staring with disbelief etched on his features. No doubt they had a Sneakoscope hidden somewhere, and were surprised by its inactivity. Or maybe they were just going to be very hard to convince. Either way, they weren't a threat to Draco.

As he turned around to walk away, he heard Dobby's voice. "Thank you, Master Draco."

He stopped and slowly turned around, adorning his face with the most rueful smile he could muster. "Just doing the right thing, Dobby. I hope you and Winky will be very happy together. Let me know if there is ever anything else I can do for you." Then he locked his gaze with Ginny Weasley's for a split second. To his delight he saw her cheeks turning red before he averted his gaze again, and walked out of the Great Hall.

"Unbelievable," Lupin said incredulously.

"For once we agree on something, Remus," Snape sneered.

"I guess miracles do occur," Flitwick piped.

"It just proves that Albus was right." McGonagall pointed out. "Draco has reformed and rehabilitated himself completely once he was no

longer under his father's influence. It really doesn't matter what you're born as."

"Are you sure that Sneakoscope of yours works, Severus?" Lupin asked.

"Unlike your junk, I assure you my artefacts are in peak condition, Remus," Snape said nastily.

Ginny only heard the comments dimly while she looked upon the two happiest house-elves in the world. Draco Malfoy had given them that happiness. Ginny wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't seen it with her own two eyes. Draco Malfoy was no longer evil! If he were, Professor Snape's Sneakoscope should have alerted them. It had been specifically tuned to Draco, so they could now be absolutely sure that he'd been completely truthful.

Maybe...maybe everybody was wrong about him, like everybody had been wrong about Harry. She excused herself and hurried out of the castle. Maybe she could just catch him.

She was shivering as she jogged through the snowy grounds of Hogwarts, belatedly realising that she wasn't wearing a cloak or anything similar to keep her warm. But she wouldn't have to be out in the cold for long, for in the distance she saw his light blond hair reflect a weak ray of sunlight. His gait was uncharacteristic for him, so hunched over and stooping.

"Malfoy...Draco, wait!" she called after him.

He turned around, surprised. "Yes, how may I help you, Ms Weasley? Oh, you're not wearing a cloak?" He started removing his own cloak as he mumbled, "You ought to know better you know...school mediwitch and all."

Ginny shook her head. "I'll go back in a minute...no need."

But Draco wasn't listening as soon she had a warm cloak draped over her shoulders. Now it was Draco who started shivering. "Now...w-what can I d-do for you?"

"Oh, take back your cloak," she said, but as she said so she was reluctant to take it off. It smelled a lot like Harry's. "Tamara Turpin's Unicorn for wizards," she muttered

Draco nodded. "G-good nose you've got there," he said, taking out his wand and performing a complicated charm. Second later he was glowing with an eerie yet warm light. "Warming Charm," he explained. "I learned it in Durmstrang...remember, in the second half of my fifth year, the exchange programme? It was a necessity most of the time."

Ginny nodded. "Crabbe and Goyle were miserable without you," Ginny said absently, and quickly covered her mouth as she realised what she'd said, or rather, that she had spoken out loud.

Draco laughed a pleasant and melodious laugh rather than the taunting laugh he used to have. He really had changed a lot. "I know." He was shaking with mirth. "Anyway, what can I do for you?"

"Err, well what you did for Dobby and Winky was really nice. I just wanted to thank you."

"Don't mention it. I gave Dobby a lot of grief in during my childhood. I didn't know any better then, but still I should have realised how wrong it all was much sooner," he said sadly, and Ginny could have sworn that tears were forming in his grey eyes, which weren't quite as cold as they used to be. "It was the least I could do." He turned around to, leave again.

"Wait, your cloak," Ginny called after him.

"You can owl it back to me," Draco called back. "Never leave a lady in the cold...one of the few good things my father taught me."

She watched him exit the main gate before heading back up to the castle. She was going home for Christmas too. She would just drop by the Ministry and return his cloak to him, she decided, with a smile on her face.

Draco smiled broadly as he Apparated back to the Ministry of Magic. It had gone even better than anticipated. He guessed that he wore the same aftershave Potter used to wear. He hadn't known that! He could still see the wistful look in her eyes as she breathed in the scent. Now she had linked his scent to Potter's...a powerful psychological stimulant, he knew.

His mind wandered back to the office. He would be getting a new partner today, who would help him with the sudden increase in house-elf issues.

He entered the lobby of the building his office shared with other Beast Division offices. He was greeted brightly by Slinky the house-elf. News travelled really fast! He smiled back and took the stairs up to his office. When he opened the door, he saw the last person he ever expected to see.

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He was positively seething with anger. And it was all Harry's fault! Even in death, that son of a hag had managed to torture him! He'd read Padma Patil's coverage of Harry's memorial service. Everybody now remembered him as Harry the Hero. They'd chosen to forget that their hero put him through a world of pain!

He had been unable to put that whole event out of his mind; it had been so unfair. He hadn't been able to sleep, for he was plagued by nightmares of Harry.... He could almost hear Harry's laughter, mocking him!

A month ago, the sleepless nights had started to take their toll, and caused him to be distracted enough to let his mind wander when it should have been focused on a rather vicious Vipertooth. The injuries to his co-worker had thankfully not been fatal, but it still gnawed at him. Even in death, Harry managed to hurt an innocent.

And now, his own brother had taken him off the job in Peru, and transferred him to the dead end job in House-elf Relocation. The only job worse than that was the Centaur Liaison office. He couldn't

believe that Charlie would do that to him. Harry had managed to turn his own blood relatives against him!

Disbelief coursed through his being. He was expected to work with Draco Malfoy. Ron shook his head, swearing he could hear Harry's voice laughing at his predicament. Then again, he heard that Draco Malfoy had undergone a few changes for the better. Maybe working with him wouldn't be so bad. And at least Malfoy had never tortured anybody.

The door creaked open and Malfoy walked in. "What are you doing here, Weasley?" he asked.

Ron was a bit surprised at the tone. It wasn't "Oh, I see." He twirled around, sweeping his arm around the office. "Welcome to the Office for House-elf Relocation. We do dull but important work."

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard it all before. Just show me to my desk."

Malfoy pointed to a desk covered with stacks and more stacks of parchments waiting to be processed. "That one over there."

Ron groaned. "Right."

"How is Granger?" Malfoy inquired.

Ron grimaced. "Don't know, don't care."

"Really? I thought you two were meant for each other. What went wrong?"

Ron's jaw locked. "Harry Potter. That's what went wrong!" he thought, but he just shrugged at Malfoy. "Women."

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## Reunions and Encounters

### Chapter 9

Hermione folded and put away the letter she had received from Percy. He'd be coming to Nomad Island for work the following week, on Valentines Day, and was bringing his pregnant wife with him.

George was taking his whole family on vacation as well, and they'd arrive a couple of days later. In his letter, he'd explained that he had received permission to open a branch of Zonko's in Concordia, and that he wanted to do it now so he could take full advantage of the festivities surrounding Concordia's fourteenth century of existence in its current form.

Hermione smiled. That had been very clever of George. The festivities had started on Imbolc and would continue till Beltaine. During that time, the city would harbour twenty thousand visitors from all parts of the wizarding world, many of whom knew the joke shop, or another shop belonging to the same chain. They would, in a way, introduce the shop to the locals.

She walked from the street up an impressive flight of steps and through a deep-set doorway under a semicircular arch. The magical heavy-timbered double door that opened up to the lobby recognised its new mistress and slowly swung open to allow her to pass.

The lobby was a wooden-floored chamber decorated with beautiful tapestries selected by Heidi, one of her new housemates who had very refined taste owing to her aristocratic upbringing. All the furnishings were elegantly carved; there were doors into several rooms and a small cupboard or cloakroom, a flight of stairs up and a side-table and chairs for waiting visitors. Alternatively, they could be shown into the parlour. This had very comfortable furniture and was often used by the new ladies of the house...Hermione and six other unmarried female Rangers. There were several precious ornaments in there as decorations, also selected by Heidi Gravenstein.

The major room on the ground floor used to be called the Pleasure Hall. It had a high table and two flanking tables. The Hall extended to

the next floor and was served by the kitchen and the workroom. The workroom was home to the three elves that helped run the house. They were free and received adequate payment, of course. The kitchen was connected to the courtyard by the back door, and by the cellars. Both cellars were accessible by trap door. An 8' wooden wall with a locked gate bordered the courtyard. Goods not kept in the cellar were put in the pantry and store. Both were well stocked at all times with high quality food, drink and crockery. There was also a study on this floor, and Hermione practically monopolised it.

She took the stairs to the first floor, which was dominated by bedchambers. A broad gallery looked down over a wooden balustrade onto the upper portion of the Pleasure Hall. This area could accommodate extra diners during a special feast, or for musicians to entertain those below. It could also be used as a dayroom.

The eight bedchambers on the first floor were all like studios. Hermione's room looked out over the street and onto Commander Ironheart's house. Heidi, Helga, Mayumi Sakai, Galatea, Lilia and Clara Da Silva occupied six other bedchambers, while an eighth was kept as a guestroom, and was currently occupied by Tempeste Louvel-Wolfe. She had arrived a couple of days earlier to visit her comatose grandson.

Ironheart had wanted her to stay at his home, but his wife, who still saw Tempeste as a threat, wouldn't have it. Instead, Hermione and the girls took her in, and she repaid them by cooking sumptuous Creole food.

The second floor was very elegant, and served as a common room of sorts, where visitors weren't allowed. Its roof was charmed like the one of the Great Hall at Hogwarts.

The women had moved in on New Year's Day, and in the following week several odd gentlemen came calling at their door, asking if they were in business again. It turned out that the place used to be a high-class pleasure house, and Heidi nearly hexed a man who offered her fifty Galleons an hour. Later, she said she hadn't been offended by the proposition, because it was an understandable misunderstanding,



given the past of the house. But she'd thought she'd be worth at least a hundred an hour!

"Good evening, mistress Hermione", Zippy and Binks, the elves, said brightly as they carried a basket full of laundry.

"Hi Zippy...Binks!" Hermione replied. She noticed the chandelier between Helga and Mayumi's room was swaying lightly. "I take it Nathan is visiting again?"

The elves nodded and grinned, and Hermione felt more envious than ever. With all the extra work she was doing trying to revive Wolfe, she had no time left for a social life. At least Galatea shared her misery. She sighed and went into her room. Percy had sent a separate letter concerning Ron, and she hadn't read it yet. She had a feeling it wouldn't be good news.

She flung herself onto her bed and opened it.

Dear Hermione,

As promised, I am keeping you posted on Ron.

I am afraid he isn't doing very well. He was transferred out of Beast division by Charlie, and is now working at the Office for House-elf Relocation. He hasn't been able to function normally after you two broke up. One of his colleagues in Peru nearly got injured due to his negligence, hence the transfer.

A fresh feeling of guilt surged through Hermione as she read those sentences. Ron was miserable without her...She shook her head. Ron needed to realise that he was wrong! Until then, he was on his own.

Now about the rest of the family;

Mum is helping Hannah out with the pregnancy. That woman is a lifesaver I tell you! Bill is a father again. Fleur gave birth to a redhead, they called him Alroy. He was born on Yule, imagine that!

Ginny, well, she broke up with Lenoir. Unfortunately, she's seeing Draco Malfoy.

Hermione nearly dropped the letter in shock.

I know...shocking, isn't it? Well, it seems he's a new man. He went out of his way to pass a law for free house-elves, just so Dobby and Winky could marry. I had Severus Snape and Remus Lupin tune a Sneakoscope especially to his signature, to see if he had some sort of hidden agenda. But it never reacted. I never thought I'd say this, but it sure seems I was wrong about him. Still, I'm not thrilled about him seeing Ginny. (Neither is Ron, and he's working with Malfoy now, he hates it.)

Hermione winced as her mind made the connection. Of course, Malfoy worked at the Office for House-elf Relocation too! Despite Ron's extremely cruel words when they broke up, she couldn't help but feel a little sorry for him. She sighed and continued reading the letter.

We can discuss this when Hannah and I arrive in Concordia. I've booked us at the Sleeping Hippogriff Inn. I understand it's near the hospital, or House of Healing, as you Concordians call it. I want a hospital close by in case of complications with the pregnancy.

Hope you're mentally preparing yourself for George and his rowdy bunch.

See you soon.

P. Weasley

Despite the distressing news about Ginny, Hermione allowed herself a smile. Percy had indeed changed a lot. He was no longer as pompous as he used to be. Of course, his referring to George's kids as 'rowdy' had been evidence that a bit of the old Percy was still in there. Hermione smiled. She was sure he would make a fine Minister for Magic someday.

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Time passed in a blur the next few weeks as Hermione worked feverishly to find a cure for Max Wolfe's mysterious affliction, and desperation was starting to set in.

Serafina Esposito came into the laboratory. "How is it going?"

"Terrible. We've tried a dozen potions now. Nothing seems to work." She yielded the stool to Serafina. "I hope you'll have better luck than I've had."

Serafina stirred a bubbling potion. "So where are you going?"

"Some friends of mine are arriving in the Transit Dome," Hermione said, referring to the dome on the first tier of the city. It was the only place from which travel in and out of the city was possible...save the Ranger Citadel of course, but that fact was kept secret from most locals.

"Really? How nice! Some of my relatives will be visiting in March. How long will your friends stay?"

"Well, George Weasley...my friend, owns a large portion of the Majoke Inc stock. He's actually coming here on business. He's going to open up a branch of Zonko's in the city. He's bringing his wife and four rowdy children too."

"Rowdy...oh my!"

Hermione laughed. "Rambunctious might be a better word."

"Ah," Serafina nodded and frowned. "George Weasley? The inventor of the Language Lollipops?"

"Among other things." Hermione nodded, smiling. The Language Lollipops had been...and still were a huge hit, and several wizarding elementary schools wanted them for educational purposes. Hermione grinned at the thought that Fred would roll over in his grave if he'd known that some his inventions actually had educational value.

"Anyway, he wanted to go straight to the festivities after checking into the Ruby Dragon Lodge."

"Fancy accommodations," Serafina said, impressed.

Hermione shrugged. "I guess." George was rolling in Galleons these days. He could easily afford it. "I'll see you tomorrow." She waved and went to the transportation room to take a portal to her new home in the townhouse. There she changed and took another portal to the Transit Dome.

Many beings were anxiously waiting the arrival of relatives, like at many a Muggle airport. After a few minutes, she caught a flash of red hair. It was George, chasing and grabbing his son, Fred. Then she saw Angelina and the other children. She called their names and waved, jumping up and down.

George grinned and walked towards her, carrying a struggling Fred under his arm. The little boy was putting up quite a fight for someone who was barely eighteen months old. "Look, Fred. The silly lady is jumping up and down!"

The boy ceased his struggles and looked at Hermione with big brown eyes. He looked just plain adorable in a very exotic way, with his red hair and his complexion a few shades lighter than his mother's.

Angelina gave the elf that was handling their luggage some instructions and five sickles for his trouble, before walking over to Hermione, who couldn't help but notice the large belly the older woman had. It was noticeable that she was carrying more than one baby.

"Well, the elf took our luggage to our hotel...hi Hermione" She kissed Hermione in greeting. "...so that's that. Fred is getting cranky, and he needs a nap badly, so I'd like to take him up to the hotel with me. I'm pretty pooped too. I'll check us in, so you and the other children can go straight to the fun stuff."

"That's okay. I'll just take the children to the fair." Hermione smiled.

Angelina frowned. "What about George?"

"When I said children I meant George too!"

"Hey, I happen to be a successful business man and a responsible father," George said in mock outrage.

Hermione and Angelina laughed, and they parted ways. Hermione took George and his children to see the many shows and soon they were walking amidst many visitors and colourful entertainers. The going was a bit slow, so packed were the avenues and streets of the city, and several designated landing zones had been set up by the authorities, because landing just anywhere simply wasn't an option.

Indeed, the city's five thousand hotel rooms were crammed to capacity and a temporary village had been created outside the city to hold another ten thousand people.

Hermione looked up into the sky, beyond the criss-crossing aerial traffic, where the programme was magically written in the form of clouds. "Oh, the giant statues on Artist's Square are doing a play at one o'clock," she pointed out. The statues were magical, like the ones at Hogwarts. She thought it would be fun to watch, but it wouldn't be very entertaining for the children...and their father. "But I reckon the kids won't like that. Your children are actually a bit too young for most activities. Only Arthur could go to some of them," she said, referring to the three-and-a-half-year-old. He was showing a typical new independent streak of children his age, and George had to keep a sharp eye out to prevent him from wandering off.

"What's wrong with Arthur?"

George sighed. "He's noticed that he's a bit different from Angelina's kids. He asked me why he's got fair skin and why his brother and sisters have a bit more colouring. I tried to explain it to him as best I could. He understands now that Susie and Millie are actually his cousins, and that Angie isn't his real mum. He still has to get used to it all...come back here Arthur!" George called as a bunch of juggling dwarves distracted Arthur. "Got to keep a constant eye on him! I

nearly lost him once...Angie had a fit. These little devils are much worse though!" he said, proudly smiling down at Susan and Mildred.

They went down to the second tier, where most of the recreational facilities were, and watched several daring witches and wizards racing on their brooms through burning barrels in the game of Aingingein. Millie, who, while devious, wasn't fond of watching dangerous displays, closed her eyes and buried her face in George's chest, not wanting to look. Susie and Arthur actually enjoyed the spectacle, and cheered for a wizard as he threw the Dom through the last barrel.

Then they walked a bit further and sat down to watch an exhibition Quidditch game between the Concordian league champions and Vratsa Vultures, the team for which Krum played Seeker. The Vultures were soundly beating the amateur team.

George looked at the magical bulletin board. "Oy, Wood's coming next week!"

Hermione glanced at the bulletin board and saw that the Montrose Magpies were to play an exhibition match against the Gimbi Giant-Slayers.

"I though he played for Puddlemere United."

George shook his head. "He was doing so well with Puddlemere that several larger clubs showed their interest, including the Vultures." He nodded to the team darting above the pitch. "Oh, looks like Krum's got the snitch. Ah well, Oliver wanted to stay in Britain, so he chose the Magpies."

Hermione nodded. "How is Oliver anyway, apart from Quidditch?"

"Ah, ahem...well, he's not seeing anybody," George said, as he squirmed in his seat uncomfortably. "Rumour has it he's playing for the wrong team, but I won't believe he's a poof unless he actually turns up with a bloke on his arm.

"Oh..." Hermione said. Wood never struck her as being gay, but one never knew. She had been itching to ask how Ron was, but she didn't want to seem overeager. Still, she was worried about him so she asked George..."How is Ron?"

George nearly cringed. "He's healthy, physically. I'm not sure about his mind though. At least putting up with Malfoy is keeping him distracted. And he's in an excellent position to watch over Ginny. At least his paranoia serves a purpose there. He's got Snape's Sneakoscope to keep him company...you know, in case Malfoy slips up."

"Ginny and Malfoy..." Hermione said, slowly shaking her head in disbelief.

"It's pretty serious." George nodded. "But mum took Ginny to the magical creature reservation in Somerset, and put her through the unicorn test."

"Did she pass?" Hermione asked. She knew it wasn't really her business, but she couldn't help herself, and she shuddered as she imagined Molly Weasley dragging a terribly embarrassed Ginny through the park, loudly lecturing her about how proper witchesshould save themselves until their wedding night.

Hermione shook herself. She knew Molly was bad, but she wondered if she were really that bad. She sighed. It wasn't really fair either. It certainly seemed like a different set of rules applied to Ginny, because Molly had never given her boys much trouble when it came to courtship. Sure, she still nagged at Charlie to find a 'nice girl' and settle down, and she hadn't been thrilled when Bill eloped...and she had a fit when she'd heard that Percy had followed in Bill's footsteps. When talking to Ron, she'd hinted that he ought to propose to Hermione and marry her, so they could live together properly...Hermione barely suppressed a wince as she thought about Ron.

"Our little Ginny is still innocent." George nodded. "Not that I would have been terribly shocked if she hadn't passed the test. After all, I was a father at nineteen."

Hermione blinked several times, unsure whether she'd heard George correctly. Had he actually dropped the overprotective brother act?

"Talking about Ginny?" Percy asked, appearing behind them and sitting down next to George. "Angie told me you were off with Hermione. I reckoned I'd find you here."

"Hiya balding brother of mine. Yes, we were discussing the fate of the littlest Weasley. Are you done working for today?"

Percy sadly shook his head. "Two hour recess. Concordian politicians are very difficult to deal with."

Hermione smiled. "You ought to come by my place tonight for dinner. Heidi Gravenstein is one of our politicians. She's still learning from more experienced ones, but I bet she knows a thing or two you can use."

"Gravenstein...I know that name. Right, the Head of the Department of International Magical Co-operation in Austria is called Gravenstein."

"Her father!" Hermione nodded.

"Small world," Percy muttered. "Anyway, I got a letter from mum. Ginny and Malfoy have set a date."

"No," George groaned. "Why is she in such a hurry?"

"Oh dear," Hermione gasped. "When?"

"June 21st."

Midsummer...June...the traditional month for weddings. Hermione sighed. "Midsummer."

"I can't believe this is happening," George spat. "Isn't there any way we can stop this?"



"Afraid not, little George. But if his intentions are at least honourable...as they seem...I don't have any objections. If a person can change for the better that much, he deserves to marry our little sister."

"I guess you have a point there." George admitted grudgingly.

Suddenly, a broom that came to a stop at about four feet in front of them interrupted their discussion.

"Herm-own-ninny?"

"Hello Viktor," Hermione said brightly. "Good game."

Krum shrugged. "The opposition wasn't that strong. Vot are you doing here?"

"I live here, actually. I'm a member of the Order of Illumination," Hermione said proudly, though technically she wasn't a full-fledged member yet, but those were just details.

Krum seemed impressed. "You are a Ranger?"

Hermione nodded. "Yep."

"Vell, I am sure that you are one of the prettiest female Rangers." He winked at her. "You look good. You look a bit tired...but good."

Hermione's cheeks flushed a little. "Thank you, Viktor. Say, why don't you come by tonight for dinner? I'm half-planning a dinner anyway...George, d'you think Angelina would like to come to dinner?"

George shrugged. "I'm sure she would. Angie's perpetually hungry."

"Well, the food's really good. We have this lady staying with us who cooks deliciously. She usually cooks Cajun Creole and French cuisine."

Percy's stomach grumbled. "Damn, that sounds good, and I forgot to have lunch. Anyway, I have to stop by and see Hannah to see how

she's doing. She had mother to keep her company in England, but now she spends most of the day alone. The last thing I want is a cranky pregnant woman asking me where I've been, so I'm off. I'll see you for dinner then, Hermione. Oh, by the way, where so you live, and what time should I be there?"

"In a townhouse on the sixth tier, in north six, the northern sector. There are these stairs that lead up to an archway. You can't miss it. I'll be expecting you at seven." She turned to the other redhead. "What about you?"

"Can I bring my kids?"

"Naturally. We've got an enclosed courtyard they can play in. And I'm sure one of the elves will care for them while we eat."

"Hermione, you own a house-elf?" George asked, incredulously.

"Of course not." Percy laughed. "Elves are free in Concordia. They all get paid like Dobby and Winky. There is even an Elf Quarter on the fifth level, where only elves live, right?"

"Percy, you've done your homework. I'm impressed." Hermione beamed.

"Actually, the elf member of the Combine told me how things work here," Percy explained. He glanced at his watch. "Oh, I have to go." He hurried through the crowd in the stands and went down a flight of stairs.

"I haff to go, Herm-own-ninny. I accept your dinner invitation. Vot is the dress code?"

"Casual."

Krum nodded and floated off on his broom.

"Vell...I think he still fancies you, Herm-own-ninny!" George teased, imitating Krum.

"Oh, stop it!" Hermione huffed.

"Why shouldn't he like you?" George asked innocently. "You're a beautiful young woman. If I weren't married with kids, I'd have a go at you myself!"

"George!"

"Just joking!"

Hermione frowned. "You don't find me attractive then?" she asked. Despite her outward indignation, she had been quite pleased with George's remark.

George raised an eyebrow and grinned diabolically. "Honestly, how long has it been for you?"

"George!" she exclaimed, blushing so profusely it seemed as if the blood would seep through her pores any second.

Later, at half past seven, Hermione, some of her housemates, the Weasleys and Krum were all sitting in the Pleasure Hall, now renamed the Luminous Hall, and dinner prepared by Tempeste Louvel and the elves was being served. Helga also had a guest over, in the form of Nathaniel Kelly, who was talking...what else...Quidditch, with Krum and George.

Percy was discussing political manoeuvring with Heidi, and the other women were talking about men.

"Imagine my surprise when Percy was floating outside my window, asking me to marry and run away with him." Hannah laughed.

"That is nothing." Helga grinned, and she told the story of how Nathan professed his love to her on Christmas Day, namely by putting an engorgement charm on himself, making him almost as big as a giant and then using the sonorus charm to scream it out loud, rattling the city. "It was so embarrassing. My parents wanted to know what it was all about."

"Well, I never thought he'd take my advice so literally." Hermione smiled apologetically.

"Oh, how romantic!" Lilia, who was also present, sighed. "I wish I'd been there."

"Yes, men can surprise you sometimes, can't they?" Tempeste Louvel chuckled.

"I'll drink to that." Angelina said. "I'll eat to it too...sumptuous dinner, Tempeste."

"Thank you, sugar. I was my pleasure. I just wish I wasn't such a bother on you girls," she said, looking at Hermione, Galatea, Helga and Lilia. "But Aria Ironheart still sees me as a threat to her marriage. I can't imagine why..."

"You're the mother of his son, grandmother of his eldest grandson. You'll always be seen as a threat. The Commander's habit to stray is well known, but you are special to him, and Aria knows that," Galatea said. "Am I right to assume that he always came running immediately when you asked him to?"

"Well...yes. After Scott passed away...he saw to it that I was well taken care of."

"How did your husband die?" Lilia asked.

"Accident. He went to Norway to harvest the heartstrings of a dying Dragon...he was a wand-maker."

"Wolfe's Wondrous Wands." Lilia nodded and drew her wand. "This is one of his, I think."

"That could very well be." Tempeste nodded, briefly examining the wand. "The thing is, he owned this crystal that a wizard could touch. The crystal would then show the most compatible wand for that wizard, without having to go through all those boxes. If he didn't have that particular wand, he'd call up his fellow wand-makers and ask

them if they had made it. If not, he would custom make the wand if possible. It brought him a lot of extra business."

"Fascinating," Hermione said. "I didn't know that could be done. What happened to the crystal?"

"I sold it to Mr Ollivander," Tempeste said. "I'm not a wand maker, so I had no use for it." She frowned. "Oh, I was supposed to tell you how he died. Well, it happened like this. The dragon was lying on a fjord, you know, a rocky coastline. Scott got bitten by a Malaclaw on the way to the dragon, and got struck by lightning two days later.

"Oooh." Hermione grimaced. The Mackled Malaclaw's bite had the notorious side effect that it made its victim extremely unlucky for up to a week after the bite.

"What a way to go," Lilia gasped.

"That's what his companions said." Tempeste laughed. "Oh, I have to go and visit him sometime. He still haunts that fjord."

"Cool." Lilia grinned. "But why doesn't he move back to your place?"

"Honestly Lilia, don't you know anything? Ghosts can't go too far from their own place of death. I remember Nearly Headless Nick's Death Day party. He got some visitors, but they were all ghosts from Britain. I guess crossing an ocean is beyond them."

"Zip it brainy. I didn't ask for a lecture," Lilia snapped, annoyed.

Hermione scowled at her, but Angelina cut her retort short. "Hermione, you let George gamble?" she asked, outraged.

"Oh Angie, don't be like that!" George groaned. "I wasn't gambling. Just a little game of Dartceach...it was a sure thing. I won didn't I?"

Hermione smiled. George had persuaded her to let him participate in a game of Dartceach, a goblin card game in which cheating was allowed as long as one wasn't caught. To her surprise, and the goblins', he actually took them for all they were worth.

"You out-cheated goblins?" asked Nathan, looking awed.

"How can you trust a man like him?" Lilia asked Angelina jokingly. "A guy who can out-cheat goblins..." Her eyes lit up in admiration as she gave George a once over. "Pity you're married."

"Not at all." George winked. "What the wife doesn't know won't hurt..."

Angelina's throwing a plate of chicken and sausage gumbo in his face cut his sentence short. Sobbing, she got up and hurried out of the hall.

"What?" George asked, as he saw the women glare at him.

Percy shook his head disapprovingly. "You shouldn't have said that."

"It was just a joke!" George said defensively.

"Well, you know pregnant women...she's swelling like a balloon with hormones rushing through her body. Then she sees you flirt with another woman and probably thinks it's because you're no longer interested in her because she's all fat and ugly and..."

Having been nailed by Crawfish bisque, Percy too had been unable to finish his sentence. He wiped the dish out of his eyes and cast a bewildered look around to spot his attacker, only to see his wife glaring at him in tears.

"You prat! If you think I'm ugly just say so! No subtle hints about fat and ugly pregnant women!" she howled, before storming out of the hall.

"Smooth Percy." George grinned, getting up. "I have to reassure my lovely and spirited wife. I'll be right back."

"Wait, George! You've got to tell me what to do! You've been through this before!" Percy called, following him.

Hermione shook her head ruefully. "I hope I don't get like that if I ever get pregnant."

"You're already neurotic! If you get pregnant, I reckon you'll be much worse!" Nathan teased, and Lilia laughed..."Hear, hear!"

"I'm not that bad...am I?"

"You are a very headstrong woman, Herm-own-ninny. But it only makes you lovelier," Krum said.

Hermione blushed furiously at Krum's flirtatious compliment. "Viktor!"

"You are supposed to say thank you!" Lilia grinned.

"Is there something we need to know about?" Heidi asked, with a twinkle in her big brown eyes. "Have you been having a torrid affair with Viktor behind our backs?"

"Oh, not you too, Heidi!" Hermione groaned.

Galatea, who was quickly becoming one of her closer friends, rescued her. "That is enough, everybody," she said, and they continued to eat, and a little while later the Weasley couples returned to the table, both women looking perfectly happy again.

"Made up, have you?" Hermione smiled.

"Oh, we cleared up some misunderstandings." George said airily, and winked at his brother who was sweating bullets but looking quite relieved.

"Yeah, no problem." Percy nodded.

Then, a screaming elf came zooming into the Hall, chased by Millie and Susie. "Help poor Binks! Children wants to drive Binks crazy!"

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Why oh why do you ignore every bit of good advice you get...Potter? Harry scolded himself, as a razor sharp piece of grass cut into body. Luckily, there was a path that ran through the field of sharp grass. Unfortunately, it wound in all directions, and though he still seemed to be on the right track, he had to follow the path, and it had delayed him quite a bit.

And he had already been making terrible time. He'd been on the road for two months, having passed through a seemingly endless desert with numerous quicksand pits and few oases, and then trudged through an equally extensive marshland filled with leeches and Dugbogs that tried to sink their sharp teeth in his ankles at every available opportunity.

He was lucky to catch a break in the desert. He later found out it was called the Desert of Illusion, and that he'd been going in circles for weeks. He found out after encountering a sphinx that challenged him with a riddle.

"What are you, mortal, doing in my desert...the Desert of Illusion?"

"That was it's called, huh?"

The sphinx nodded. "I have watched you for a while now. You have followed the sun to orient yourself, have you not?"

Harry nodded.

"Foolish mortal. Have you forgotten that this sun..." He looked up. "...does not shine in this realm? You have followed it, thinking you've been going east, instead, you've been going in circles."

Harry groaned. Of course! There had only been a faint reflection of the sun when he stayed at Carey's, yet here he encountered the sun as it shone in the earth realm. It hadn't crossed his mind, for the sun looked so natural over the desert.

The sphinx grinned. "I am the caretaker of the sands. The caretaker of the winds told me you'd be coming here. I am not supposed to help you, but he insisted, and I still owe him a favour.



"Instead, I will challenge you with a riddle. If you answer correctly, I will guide you through the dessert, but if you are mistaken...you would have the face the same consequences as you would when facing a real sphinx."

Harry nodded.

"Very well. If I tell you: "Everything I say to you is a lie," am I telling the truth, or am I lying?"

Harry was baffled. It wasn't fair! This riddle didn't seem to have an answer. He sat down on the sand to think about it. Hours passed, and it still didn't make sense to him.

This riddle sounded like the one about the sound a falling tree in the forest, or the one about the clapping of one hand. Was it at all possible? He got up, bracing himself for the inevitable attack. "This riddle is a paradox. I don't think it has any one right answer."

Instead of attacking, the sphinx smiled. "You are correct...and courageous, for it took a lot of courage to answer that question the way you did. I will show you the way. You can ride on my back," the caretaker of the sands said.

"What if you're an illusion too?"

The caretaker laughed. "At least I'd be an illusion that talks back!"

Harry shrugged and hopped onto its back, and it carried Harry through the desert until he reached the marsh. "This is where my stewardship ends. I can go no further."

"Are you telling the truth, or are you lying?" Harry grinned.

The caretaker laughed. "Don't think about it that much. It'll give you a headache."

Harry turned to look at the marsh. "Is there a caretaker of the marshes?" he asked. When he received no answer he glanced back,

only to find that the caretaker had disappeared. Shaking his head, Harry continued his journey

He hissed in pain as another blade of grass cut through his torn uniform and into his skin. Then, he saw a clearing in the field of tall grass and a little hut with a thatched roof standing in the middle. An old woman seemed to be weaving clothes from the very same sharp grass that grew around the clearing.

"Excuse me," he asked cautiously.

"Hello, Mr Potter," the crone replied, not looking up from her work. "How are you on this fine day? How do you like your journey so far?"

"A bit light-headed from the blood-loss," Harry muttered, looking at all the bleeding cuts in his limbs. "The journey's going just fine, thank you. How far do I yet have to go?"

"I imagined as much," the crone said with a toothless grin, and Harry was irritated by her lack of answer to his question. "Go inside...wash yourself in the tub and pull on the clothes lying on the table. You can stay here for a while."

"No thanks. I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"You won't be going anywhere," the crone chuckled, looking at the sky. "Do you see those dark clouds?"

Harry looked up and saw that the usual pastel yellow clouds had turned and angry dark yellow.

"A storm is coming...and storms last much longer here than they do in your realm."

"A bit of stormy weather never scared me," Harry said, full of bravado. He he'd flown through the mother of all storms once, to try to capture Peter Pettigrew so Sirius' name could be cleared. He felt a pang of resentment about the fact that it had happened posthumously, and that his godfather had never again walked the world a free man.

"You forget, Mr Potter, that the wind animates the grass. You will be cut to ribbons," the crone said, shaking her head. "You have been badly cut already, and it would be much worse with the whipping grass."

Harry dropped his pack and took off his armour, which had protected most of his torso from the sharp grass. "Then I guess I should thank you for letting me stay?"

"I am a caretaker," she simply replied. "It is my duty. Besides, you are foolish for undertaking this journey. You should have waited. You need all the help you can get."

News sure travelled fast, he thought, puzzled, as he hobbled into the little house and jumped into a tub that was filled with fragrant water, after he stripped off what was left of his Ranger uniform. It had suffered a lot during his journey, and Harry wasn't sure he could repair it any more.

He soaked in the tub for what seemed like hours, before he clambered out and dried himself off, noticing that all his cuts had healed. These caretakers' ability to heal was truly amazing, he thought, as he slipped on the trousers and the long-shirt made of the strange green fibre, probably made from the strange grass.

Suddenly he realised that there was an additional room to the hut. It was funny, since he hadn't seen it before, but hardly anything about the realm surprised him anymore. He poked his head through a curtain of strings with beads attached to them, and saw the woman sitting in a hammock, puffing a long pipe.

He sat on the floor, seeing not other thing to sit on, and stared at the merrily crackling fire, as droplets of rain started to pound the hut. he asked, "How long do I have to wait?"

"I believe it will be two weeks, before you can continue on your journey."

"But I can't wait that long," Harry said. "I have to get to the portal."

"Are you sure you want to do that? Would you not rather wait for the eclipse? The forest is filled with peril."

"There you go again...saying that the forest is dangerous," Harry snapped irritably. "Tell me then, what is so dangerous about that forest? What will I find there?"

The old crone looked at the dark orange clouds outside. "Whatever lies within."

"What is in there, then?"

She looked at him warningly through her beady eyes. "I do not know. The danger cannot be defined. All I know is that it is a shapeless evil."

"I've fought evil before. I'm sure I can handle it," Harry said confidently.

"Have you now?" she cackled. "No, Mr Potter. "You've fought manifestations of evil...not evil itself."

"So you are saying that there's something in there that is the mother of all evil?"

She nodded. "And it cannot be fought. For how can you fight something unknown to you?"

"Then I'll just have to avoid it," Harry said dryly, gazing back into the fire.

"If you can," she said darkly. "Now tell me...for I sense there is something bothering you. You have had a lot of time to think about things on your journey...have you not?"

"I guess. I have to keep my mind occupied. The loneliness is enough to drive anyone insane. Do you caretakers always keep to yourselves like this? Don't you ever socialise?"

"We perceive time differently than you mortals do. We are not easily bored." She settled her beady gaze on him. "But that is not what is bothering you, is it? Boredom?"

Harry shook his head. More than once, he'd reflected on his life and asked himself the question: had it been worth it? He sighed. "I've been lonely practically my whole life. It got a bit better for a couple of years, but then Voldemort returned. Everybody was depending on me, and I could almost physically feel the weight on my heart then. My friends supported me, but they never understood! Except for Ginny. Somehow, she did understand," he said, and felt a stabbing pain as he remembered how she always used to be there for him.

The caretaker puffed her pipe and looked into the fire thoughtfully, before saying, "Loneliness, is like the storm outside. You may wish you were basking in the sun, but had you basked in that sun all your life, would you appreciate it?"

"Huh?"

The caretaker inhaled a bit of smoke, and blew out smoke rings shaped like bolts of lightning...much like Harry's scar. "Loneliness strengthens you character, like the rain strengthens the land."

"But in my case, the rains never stop, and now I feel like I'm drowning in the flood."

"Have they never stopped, or did you follow the clouds around?"

"Or do the clouds follow me around?" Harry retorted.

"I think both of us are right. Loneliness has been forced upon you, yet you sought it out as well, so you have little reason for self-pity," the caretaker said sternly.

"But I did it for the sake of others."

"Which is very noble of you! But that does not mean that you can hold them responsible for your loneliness."

That comment washed over him like Peeves' dropping a bucket of ice water on him. The caretaker was right, of course. He had been resenting people for their easy lives, while he had suffered to make it possible for them. Yet it had been his own willing choice, and he'd nearly forgotten about that. What Dumbledore told him, about the choices one made, now made more sense than ever! A person could not only choose a path, or a course of action, but living with the consequences of that choice was a choice by itself.

The caretaker saw his troubled look and smiled. "Nobody's perfect. I know you had to maintain the illusion of perfection for the sake of others as well, but that doesn't mean that you have to be. As for your loneliness, you can choose to let it frighten you...or strengthen you."

Harry nodded. The caretaker had given him a lot to think about.

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Harry stayed there for two weeks, keeping mostly to himself, as he saw the high winds outside whip the sharp grass. He knew he had done the right thing as he saw then grass sway over the narrow pathway. Then, two weeks later he went on his way, walking through the path that crossed the grass once more, this time protected by the clothing provided by the caretaker. It occurred to him that he didn't know her name, but he guessed she would be the caretaker of the grass, or something.

His trek continued through the fields of grass for about a week, when he saw a mountain in the distance. According to the caretaker of the winds, the forest would be beyond the mountain. He was nearly there!

The realisation gave him an energy boost and he quickened his pace, drawing closer and closer to the mountain. It was only when he reached the base of the mountain, that he realised that it was probably bigger than the largest mountain in his own realm, Mount Everest. He looked up, and saw the slope disappear in the pastel yellow clouds, obscuring what lay above it.

Undeterred he started his ascent. He climbed for days on end, trying to find a pass to the other side. Some parts of the climb were easy, while others were on slopes full of loose rubble, and incredibly hazardous. The climb got a lot more difficult as he got higher, for the temperature dropped and the air got thinner and thinner, until taking a single step was a huge challenge.

His mind fogged up by the lack of oxygen, he faintly heard a rumble in the distance. He looked up and saw a dozen huge boulders coming down at him. Drawing on energy he didn't know he had, he sprinted to a huge boulder sticking out of the mountainside.

As the boulders thundered past, some crashing against his hiding place, he realised with mounting dread that beings, rather than erosion and gravity had probably induced their coming down.

Mountain trolls! As that thought struggled across his mind he heard the telltale roar of trolls. He cursed inwardly. He'd have to wait for nightfall and evade them. Normally trolls wouldn't trouble him that much, but he had to count on his wand being useless.

His vision blurred for an instant, before returning slightly less sharp than it had been before. His hastily performed Oculus Reparus charm was wearing off. He drew his wand and muttered the spell, pointing at his eyes, but nothing happened. He sighed in frustration. His luck seemed to be running out.

He spent the night on the mountain in a cold previously unimagined. He suspected that his clothes insulated his body well, and that there was probably a magical quality to them. He silently thanked the caretaker for it, realising that he would have died a dozen times over were it not for their care and guidance.

Unable to stay awake because of sheer exhaustion, he soon drifted off into a deep sleep.

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Athanasios Anastasiou paced around in his underground lair, draining the last droplets of blood from a cat. It wasn't as good as human blood, but it was enough to sustain him.

After five hundred years, there wasn't much that could worry him, but he was still apprehensive about this meeting. This creature was a lot older than he was, and he and his minions had raised it on the black moon of July 31st.. It was still weak but if the ancient scripts were anything to go by, it would become invincible once it had grown to attain its full power.

Merlin had managed to banish it with a stroke of luck in the past, but no mistakes would be made this time.

He frowned. A pity what happened to Skaras, really. The ancient would have been a great component in the grand scheme of things, but he knew that Skaras wouldn't have settled for second place, behind The One. It would have destroyed him anyway after that fact became apparent.

The heavy metal doors to his chamber were pushed open by a pair of Dark Trolls, beings that were created by a wizard called Vedor the Vile, back when Athanasios was still among the living...and a member of the Order of Illumination.

He regarded the Trolls steadily, like a predator sizing up prey. These trolls would be difficult to tackle, even for him. They were an unholy crossing between trolls and wizards, and were nearly as intelligent as humans, with limited magical powers to supplement their prodigious troll strength. With the exception of some scholars and the Rangers of Illumination, the wizarding world knew nothing of these beings...but they would...soon!

A female with beauty unlike any other he'd ever seen, walked into his chambers, and nonchalantly sat in his chair. She looked at him with her pearly white eyes. Now he felt like prey. He went down on one knee in a show of respect, a gesture she didn't respond to.



"Once... I was a wizard like you were. But I evolved, and reached the next level. I also learned then that true immortality is impossible and quite overrated."

"Perhaps not, my lady. There was a wizard named Flamel, who created the possibility for an elixir..."

She raised her hand, and he fell silent. "I know about such elixirs, yet their effects are not permanent, are they?"

Anastasiou shook his head. "The elixir must continually be taken. There was a wizard named Voldemort, who pursued immortality, but another wizard vanquished him. But I have acquired the information he sought in his brief lifetime and I studied it. He came closer than anyone else I know of... it could be of assistance."

"No. I am no longer interested in immortality. I just want absolute power that lasts a lifetime."

"You will need allies, my lady, in order to accomplish that. There is an Order of wizards called the Order of Illumination. Its members are the best, brightest and most stalwart among wizards who oppose our kind. And most of them do not see, or acknowledge the merits of the acquisition of power. Only a few of them, like myself, were realists," he sneered. "They cannot be beaten by us alone."

"I'll leave it up to you to find me allies," she said.

His jaws clenched together in frustration. Maybe this being wasn't as exalted as she was made out to be. "That is easier said than done, my lady. The Order of Illumination has been weakened by their war against Voldemort and his allies, but they managed to destroy many of them in the process. Unfortunately, most of Voldemort's allies could have been our potential allies. Those who survived may be reluctant to join us. I need a show of strength. Fear will bring them into line with us."

She gave him a haughty little smile. "True, but a show of strength will also alert our foes to my presence. I cannot prevail in my current state. We need to take the enemy by surprise."

"Then what do you suggest we do?"

"If you find a potential ally, bring him here. I will persuade him to join our side."

"A wise idea, my lady," Anastasiou said in an oily voice, as he retreated from what obviously were her chambers now.

"Athanasios?" she called after him lazily.

"Yes, my lady?"

"Do not forget what I am. I could sense your doubt. I understand it, but it offends me. After I prove my might I will not allow any more doubt. Do you understand?"

Anastasiou nodded and walked out of the chamber.

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## Dark Force Rising

### Chapter 10

Harry stumbled on a piece of rubble littering the mountain plateau he was on. Playing hide and seek with a clan of mountain trolls had cost him precious time, and he was still nowhere near the Forest of Reflections. He walked along a barren, stone slope, which was way too steep to climb. Instead he just followed it, hoping to find a canyon through which he could walk, or maybe a mountain pass, that would allow him to reach the right side of the mountain.

His eyesight was almost at its worst, and he ineffectually tried the Oculus Reparus Charm again, nearly poking the wand into his eye in frustration. His vision was still a blur, and he could only discern objects clearly, a few paces away at most. Any further than that, and he had to identify things by smell or hearing.

He heard the roars of the trolls again, and thereby deduced that they were near! They had probably picked up his trail again. He started walking faster, smashing the tips of his boots and by extension, his toes, against the many small boulders that were strewn around the plateau.

He finally found the canyon he'd been hoping to find about two hours later. It occurred to him that it was an excellent place for an ambush, but he had to take his chances and go through it.

Behind him, he could now hear the thundering footsteps of the trolls, and he knew he had run out of time. He ran into the canyon hoping there was somewhere to hide. A stream was coming his way, and he walked into the water and trudged his way upstream, hoping that it would at least mask his trail a little.

As time passed by, and Harry walked deeper into the canyon, it ended at a cave from which water came rushing out, and Harry had no choice but to go into the cave. It was too small for the trolls to follow him, and then it dawned on him that the trolls weren't following him anymore anyway. He'd lost them! He smiled as he kept wading through the knee-deep water. The cave was becoming foggier and

foggier, and warmer for some reason. Then he realised that the water he was wading through should be frozen, because of the cold at this altitude.

He reached a point where he could go two ways: one was to continue in the water, but he opted to take the second path, for that cave seemed larger, whereas the cave from which the water was pouring seemed to narrow a bit, as far as Harry could tell.

The heat grew even more intense as Harry walked farther into the passage he'd chosen, and he suddenly had an idea why the trolls hadn't followed him in. A faint orange glow was reflected on the cave wall up ahead, and Harry's nose caught the scent of the many gasses associated with volcanoes. The mountain was a volcano, and he had this sinking feeling that he was headed straight towards the lava.

Turning back was not an option, since he would probably run into the same or another clan of mountain trolls, and he guessed that the passage through which the stream ran wouldn't take him where he needed to go either. If he could get around the crater somehow he was sure to reach the right side of the mountain, where he could descend towards the forest. He would just have to take the heat...literally.

The gasses were starting to get to him, and he knew he'd be poisoned if he kept inhaling the polluted air. He grabbed his wand, and he felt a tingle rush through his fingers. It was working! He bit his lip in frustration. Somehow, instinctively, he knew that his wand had only gathered enough juice for one charm. He briefly pondered where this sudden knowledge came from. He didn't know how he knew, but he guessed he was attuning himself to the mirror realm a little.

Harry concentrated and performed the Bubble-Head Charm. Immediately he had a supply of air as the bubble filtered the noxious gasses out and produced breathable air. He peered through the bubble and cursed. It didn't exactly improve his vision so he had to be really careful. Unfortunately, the intense heat disabused him of any thoughts of going slowly, because he knew he'd be roasted if he stayed near the crater too long.

He continued forward and when he reached the magma conduit, his flesh felt like it was on fire. Harry recklessly hurried along a narrow ledge with the liquid fire far below casting its heat towards him, at times nearly stepping on Ashwinders and fire salamanders that seemed to crawl and slither on the ledge in large numbers.

Going as fast as he deemed safe along the ledge, he never noticed a particularly large salamander. He stepped on one of its front legs, and it snapped at his heels in retaliation, and whipped its tail around his ankles.

Harry lost his balance and went down, falling on the ledge, and rolling off the side! He just managed to grab the edge, and the blistering heat of the rock tortured his hands, punishing him brutally for his mistake. But he couldn't let go, for that would mean certain doom in the lava far below. He needed to survive! Ignoring the searing pain in his hands he hoisted himself onto the ledge and continued.

He finally got to what seemed like a tunnel hacked into the rock, and he went in, hoping that it would take him to where he needed to go. He absently wondered who made it and what would await him in it, but he didn't ponder it too long, for the heat of the lava made him disregard any dangers that might have been lurking in it.

As he marched on, the heat grew less and less, and he was almost glad he'd be back in the chilly mountain air as he reached the end of the tunnel.

He looked over his blistered hands after he finally noticed their relentless throbbing. He heard the rushing of water not too far in the distance, and deemed it safe to look for it, not expecting to find any trolls on this side of the mountain.

Harry followed the sound and reached the stream quickly, and he submerged his hands and his face in the water. Now that the bubble charm had worn off, the icy cold water stung his face, which felt like it had been severely sunburned in a very short time, from the heat. But it refreshed him as well.

He decided to head back towards the tunnel to camp out there for a while, for he needed time to recover. Once there, he opened the bag Carey had made him, and took out one of the fruits he had got from the caretaker who lived amidst the sharp grasses. It was highly nutritious, and Harry felt full after just one fruit. He knew he wouldn't have to eat for a couple of days now. Then he took out a water skin that never ran out of water, and drank to sate his enormous thirst. The intense heat seemed to have sucked the moisture right out of him.

At the bottom of the bag, he saw the miraculum weed. It seemed unchanged, and fresh. Harry guessed the bag preserved anything it contained. He wondered...

He took one leaf of the weed and crushed it, rubbing it against his palms. The pain in his blistered hands disappeared instantly. Then he rubbed the leftover sap in his hands on his face, and the milder ache in his face also drained away almost instantly. The weed's healing properties were astounding!

No longer in too much discomfort, Harry reclined against the tunnel wall. He would wait until the following night, before moving on again. It was a gamble, given his poor eyesight, but he'd rather have a couple of stubbed toes than take his chances with a clan of mountain trolls.

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Having almost instantly recovered from his burns with the help of miraculum weed, Harry slowly and carefully made his way down the mountain for a couple of days. The air was getting thicker and more breathable again, and in the distance he saw a dark blur that had to be the Forest of Reflections. Joy surged through him. He was nearly there!

Lower and lower he went. The barren slopes of the mountain started to get some mosses and other simple forms of vegetation, and it gradually increased as he reached the valley below, where the forest began.

It was eerily quiet for some odd reason. He could feel that someone, or something was watching him. Then he heard the sound of a branch snapping, and a growl following it. Something whistled through the air and Harry flattened himself against the forest floor. A projectile of some kind passed through the space his torso had occupied half a heartbeat earlier. His Ranger training had sharpened his reflexes and his experience with dodging Bludgers had also contributed to his quick reaction that had probably saved his life just now.

'Great...just great. Forest trolls!' he thought, as he shot up and darted into the underbrush. The growl of the forest troll had a higher pitch than the typical mountain troll roar, and he could hear them behind him, closing in slowly.

His grass cloak got snagged on a branch and it yanked him off his feet, causing him to land rather painfully on his back. He saw something vaguely like a spear whistling through the air where he would have been if his cloak hadn't got caught on the branch. It buried itself in a nearby tree, where it remained vibrating for a moment.

He quickly got to his feet once again and ripped the spear out of the tree. He could see the blurry image of the trolls now, so he knew running was of no use no use.

'This is it. Nowhere to run.' He didn't feel fear...just anger. He hadn't come this far to die like this! He screamed in frustration and threw the huge spear at the largest troll he could discern. A meaty 'splunch' ensued, and the troll howled in agony and collapsed on the forest floor, shaking ground and the surrounding trees with the sheer force of impact caused by its tremendous bulk.

The other trolls screamed in terror and retreated into the trees with extreme haste.

Harry wasn't sure what had happened. He carefully approached the downed troll and nearly vomited as its awful smell awful smell filled his nasal cavities. He squinted and peered at the motionless body.

The spear had gone straight through its body, and troll blood was soaking the forest floor.

The young wizard frowned. There was no way he could have thrown that spear that hard. He simply wasn't strong enough, and in hindsight he found it surprising he'd even been able to throw it in the first place. He had just thrown it in anger, because he was about to die anyway... He'd thrown it in anger! Harry blinked as he realised that he'd probably used wand-less magic in his desperate attempt to save his own life.

He smirked slowly. This troll must have been the chieftain. Harm the chieftain and the other trolls retreat, he thought, remembering his training. At least these particular trolls would leave him alone now!

Knowing he had to get away from the carcass, lest he also face the scavengers that would soon tear into it, Harry grabbed his bag and walked deeper into the forest. After a few hours, in which he found remarkably few life forms and the forest got denser and gloomier, a tree lit up with many red lights as he drew closer to it. It was obviously full of Clabberts, tree-dwelling creatures that looked like a cross between a monkey and a frog. The red lights started moving away from him, and he saw some shadows jumping from tree to tree. The Clabberts were fleeing!

Harry was puzzled. He didn't think he was that much of a threat to them and a dull ache spread through his chest as he remembered that Hagrid had once told him that, while skittish, Clabberts rarely fled at the sight of a wizard. Maybe these Mirror Realm Clabberts were afraid of him because they had never seen a wizard before. He knew he'd be wary of something he'd never seen before.

He smiled cockily in the darkness. Or maybe the Clabberts were afraid of him because of the mere sight of him, alive. He knew Clabberts were fairly intelligent, and maybe they thought he might be dangerous because the trolls and other creatures at the top of the food chain hadn't managed to kill him.

His smile faded as he heard an unpleasantly familiar sound behind him. A sound he had learned to recognise on his mission in Greece.



Or maybe the Clabberts know something I don't, he thought grimly as he broke into a run. He really didn't want to deal with a Chimaera. Not without a working wand!

As he ploughed through the underbrush, he knew it was too late! The beast had probably picked up his scent way before he'd heard it coming, and it was now coming after him. He ran faster, and the sounds of heavy footsteps grew more frequent.

He frowned. The Chimera was pacing him, not trying to overtake him, and making a lot of noise. He knew they were capable of very stealthy movement...It had to be herding him towards another Chimera that was probably lying in ambush. Though these creatures tended to be solitary, he knew he must have had the misfortune to wander into the territory of a breeding couple.

He needed to be smart if he wanted to survive this, Harry kept thinking feverishly as he ran! From what he could tell by listening, the beast was coming up behind him from his right. Logically speaking, this would mean that the other Chimera was somewhere in front of him to the left. If he timed things just right...he could sprint to the right at the last possible instant, putting both creatures behind him and giving him slightly more options, and a little more time. Of course, the painfully apparent flaw to his plan was that he couldn't see a thing and that his stalkers were known to be very stealthy plus he doesn't know how far it is ahead of him. Harry groaned in frustration as the anger in him started to mount again. He started to physically tremble with rage.

Harry reached a clearing in the forest and saw a group of bushes at its centre. He grimaced as he remembered Greece. That Chimaera had chosen a very similar spot for an ambush. He fixed his eyes on the bushes. He'd seen Voldemort do this, so he had to be able to do it as well! "Incendio!" he screamed

The bushes burst out in flames before he even pronounced the last syllable, and an anguished howl met his ears. A large creature came crashing through the burning bushes and started to roll around on the forest floor, its monstrous body consumed by flames. Harry bolted

past it at top speed and launched himself into the underbrush after he reached the other end of the clearing.

He glanced back at his handiwork and vaguely saw that the other Chimaera had given up on the chase to aid its mate. He knew he should feel a pang of regret...or something, but he didn't. He couldn't. Such feelings had no place in moments like these. It was either him or them, he thought grimly as he ran into the woods.

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Harry had known the forest would be big! He had seen its vastness stretching out and covering the horizon when descending the mountain. Well, actually he'd only seen a dark blur, but he had known it was the forest.

He dragged one foot in front of the other. It couldn't be very far anymore...according to the caretaker of the winds. He had to be near the centre of the forest!

He'd left the grass lady in the beginning of March...it had taken him a week to get to the mountain...then it had taken him about a week and a half to get over the mountain, but he couldn't be sure since the thin air hadn't exactly promoted thinking. Neither had the situation in the blasted forest!

Harry hadn't dared to sleep too deeply, for fear of being attacked. So now he was both mentally and physically exhausted, and all concept of time was lost to him for the time being. He guessed it could be mid March to late March. Early April at worst!

He chuckled ruefully. He might as well have waited for the eclipse. It would have saved him a lot of trouble, and in the end the difference in time wouldn't have mattered much. And he still hadn't found the portal!

On the bright side, he'd been left largely alone after the Chimaera attack, he thought, as he listened to his stomach grumbling. He hadn't eaten in five days, since he'd had the last of the fruit he'd been given. He was feeling faint with hunger, and weak. He'd also received

some Doxy bites a couple of days ago after narrowly escaping from a swarm, and the wounds were starting to get infected. The mild but irritating effect the poison from the bites had also didn't make his life any better, and he'd found out that Doxy Venom was one thing that miraculum weed didn't counter, at least, not in its pure form.

His attention was suddenly drawn to a flash of sunlight reflected off a silvery surface. He looked up and saw a strange tree with a dense canopy of purple leaves, with a huge mirror-like circle in its trunk. Even with his bad eyes, Harry could see the energy pulsing out of it. The Portal! It looked a lot like the portals in Concordia!

He grinned...chuckled...and finally let out a roar of triumph as he sprinted towards the tree. He stopped in front of it and tentatively reached out to touch the shimmering surface, as if to check if it was really there. It felt extremely cold and liquid-like. The liquid came out and wrapped itself around his hand, then his arm, before it jumped out and completely enveloped the young wizard.

Harry felt cold, like he'd felt in the underground river that had sent him into the mirror realm. The cold was so intense that it made his head hurt incredibly, as if he had an ice cream headache, only infinitely worse. The pain kept increasing steadily, and Harry felt as if he was being shaken all about as he floated in the viscous substance. He clutched his scar...and as he struggled to stay conscious, he felt the bile rising in his throat, much like it did after long Floo trips. Maybe the side effects of this portal were much more unpleasant than those caused by Floo travel.

All of the sudden he doubled over and rolled himself into a foetal ball. It was like nothing he had ever felt before. He balled his fists and his mouth opened in a silent scream, as the darkness that had nibbled at the edges of his consciousness whisked him away.

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Draco ran his hand through his silvery-blond hair. Freedom was getting very popular with elves, and he and Weasley were getting buried beneath all the requests for all kinds of licences regarding elves. He'd put out a request for two new staffers, one to boost the

workforce and the other to replace him after he left the Ministry in June.

His mother had got used to the idea of his marrying a Weasley. After all, she was a pureblood and the Weasleys were no longer poor, although for some odd reason his future mother-in-law insisted on living in that pigsty.

Draco smirked. In about two months he would be married to Ginny Weasley, and he'd finally be able to pluck her flower.

Draco chuckled. He had thought that Lenoir, whom he knew by reputation, had made short work of her virginity. But apparently, the stupid half-blood hadn't had what it took.

In a meantime, Draco knew he'd have to contain himself. The Weasleys still had him watched. Ginny, bless her innocent little heart, had told him so!

"Wipe that smile of your face, Malfoy," Ron Weasley grumbled.

"It's a free wizarding nation. Harry Potter made sure of that, remember?" he said, not bothering to look in Weasley's direction, and to his satisfaction he heard Weasley's cheap quill crumble. He knew it was below the belt, but he just hadn't been able to resist. He just loved to torture his colleague emotionally. He continued, "You know, if he were alive, he'd probably be marrying Ginny..."

"Shut up!"

Draco straightened himself. Time to move in for the kill! He pretended to glance around nervously. "You know...I never told anyone this, but he threatened to kill me, after the trial."

That got Weasley's attention. He glanced down at something in his desk, the Sneakoscope that no doubt still lay hidden there, and Draco had to resist with all his might not to smirk. Come on, Weasley! Still think that Sneakoscope is going to give me away?

Weasley looked back at him. "Why didn't you tell anybody about this?"

"And hurt Ginny? You know how she feels about Potter! Besides, nobody would believe me!"

"So why did you tell me?" Ron asked, eyeing him sceptically.

"Come on, because you know how he really was. I only felt truly safe when I heard he was dead. Do you know how afraid I was that he might come back to get me..." Someone knocking on the door interrupted him. Seconds later, the door opened a little a pretty face framed by red hair poked through the gap.

"Ginny?" Ron frowned

"My love!" Draco said delightedly. "Have I told you that your mere presence brightens my day?"

"Oh please," he heard Weasley mutter, and Ginny glared at her brother.

"Keep your comments to yourself," she said icily, before bending down over Draco's desk and kissing him on the lips. Then she glanced at her brother again. "Can I have some privacy?"

"No. I have too much work to do," Weasley replied nastily.

Draco smiled. He was really missing sex with Pansy...and even Millicent, but tormenting Ron Weasley almost made up for it. "I'm almost done for the day. I just have to finish up here."

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Ron balled his fists after Ginny and Malfoy left the office. So Harry had threatened to kill Draco? And he hadn't been lying. The Sneakoscope would have alerted Ron if he had.

And to think that his resolve had started to fade...that he'd actually been entertaining the notion of Harry, maybe not being evil... At least Malfoy was good for something!

How he longed to tell the world this new bit of information, but doing so would alienate him from his family even further, and they wouldn't believe him anyway. He ground his teeth together in frustration.

Harry still managed to torture him! And it was also Harry's fault that Ginny had fallen for Malfoy. Ron had once overheard Ginny telling their mother that the thing she liked the most about Draco was the fact that he wore Harry's cologne. The memory of Harry! That blasted Harry Potter!

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Ginny strolled down Diagon Alley, hand in hand with Draco. They'd had dinner together at the Leaky Cauldron. She knew her mother would give her quite a bit of trouble for missing the Friday family dinner, but she knew she had done the right thing. Even though Percy had made peace with the fact that she was seeing Draco, he still didn't want to be in the same room with him if it could be avoided. The same thing went for Charlie, and she knew George would have shown his displeasure as well, but he was still in Concordia.

Apparently the shop had been such a hit that he'd decided to stay and personally oversee it for a little while longer while he looked for a suitable person to run the shop after he left. Angelina, who'd be giving birth in about two weeks, if all went well, had voiced her fears that George wouldn't be present for the birth of his children. She'd also told Molly about her suspicion that George might be interested in another woman, a colleague of Hermione's, and while Ginny knew it was plain ridiculous, Molly had taken it quite seriously, and she really pitied George for the Howler Molly must have sent him.

"A penny for your thoughts..." Draco said "And a fortune for your heart."

Ginny blushed. He always said the sweetest things, and he was so sincere. Although, at times, a look that reminded her of Draco at

Hogwarts, would return, and make her uncomfortable. "I was thinking about my family."

"It must be nice to have a family like that." Draco sighed. "I try not to think about mine."

He looked at her with sad, grey eyes, and she felt her heart tear a little. He had beautiful eyes. Yet they weren't the emerald ones she saw in her dreams...she blinked to clear away those treacherous thoughts. "Why not?"

"Come on, Ginny! You know how they are. I was surprised you still wanted to marry me, in spite of my family."

"Funny, I thought the same thing about you."

"Ginny, you have a wonderful family! Why wouldn't I like them?"

"Maybe because they all hate you?" she offered mournfully.

"Your mum too?" Draco asked, surprised and shocked.

"She's willing to keep an open mind." Ginny said, shaking her head, causing her red hair, to sweep over her cheeks. She had it cut till it just fell over her ears, and left two tendrils to curve along her cheeks. Her mum hadn't liked it.

"Good to hear." Draco smiled and brought up her hand to kiss it. "Why don't I take your mind off things? I know this bloke who has Port Keys to the Caribbean. We could stay awake, and go for a night-time stroll on the beach." He pulled her to him and ran his hand across her back and started to kiss her lightly on her neck. "We could have a few cocktails, and..."

Ginny knew where this was going. "Draco, please...we've discussed this already. Besides, I'm not just ready, but I promise I will be, on our wedding night."

"Come on, we're practically married...we're going to get married anyway!" As he said that, she saw anger flash in his grey eyes, for an

instant reminding her of the Draco Malfoy she used to know at Hogwarts.

"Draco? Why does it matter so much? If you love me, what are two more months?"

He sighed in frustration and stepped away from her.

"Are you mad at me?" she asked, her voice wavering.

Draco locked his eyes with hers. He had to do damage control. "No, I'm mad at me, for doing something that stupid. I lost control just now...I could lose you because of that!" he lied smoothly. He called up some tears to his eyes, something he had practised a lot, using the thought of losing his secretly-amassed fortune. He went down on his knees and hugged her around her middle. "Can you forgive me?" he sobbed.

"Of course, Draco." She smiled sweetly, and Draco sighed with relief inwardly, cursing himself for losing control at the same time. He really had to find a way to satisfy his needs covertly.

He pulled away from Ginny. "Well, it's getting late. If you want to spare me a lecture from your big bad brother Percy on Monday, you'd better Apparate home."

"Right...bye then!" Ginny said, bending down and pecking him on the lips, before Disapparating.

A hooded figure appeared seemingly out of nowhere and started applauding him mockingly. "Bravo, Mr Malfoy! Seldom have I seen such convincing acting!"

"I meant every word I said...and who the hell are you?" he sneered.

"Allow me to tell you that I am a mind reader, and that my faction knows all about your little fortune in Petra."

Draco paled. It was all over...all he had worked for... "What do you want?"



"That is my line, Mr Malfoy. I'm going to make you an offer you can't refuse, and I doubt you would want to. I commend you. It was highly difficult for us to find out about you, and I must say, I admit I am a bit curious to know how you managed to fool all those lowlifes and maintain your disguise. You are very crafty and resourceful, and my master would like to have you in his camp."

What was this all about? Was there another megalomaniac wizard out there, bent on taking over the world?

"I assure you this is not the case, Mr Malfoy. Either way, it would be unwise for you to refuse...now that I have approached you. At the very least, you will lose that fortune you hold so dear. But my master does not require open loyalty, like Voldemort did after he thought he had it made. Even after my master takes over, your role in this whole issue need never be known."

Draco smirked. "A very tempting offer, and I clearly see I have no choice in the matter, and I understand this isn't a Ministry trick. You can't be an agent; you've... broken all the rules of lawful entrapment. But how do you know I won't go to the Ministry?"

"We are much more efficient than Death Eaters, Mr Malfoy. You simply wouldn't live long enough...ah, I see you have a request? You would like us to..."

Draco nodded. "If your faction is as efficient as it seems, you could kill Percy Weasley and make it look like an accident."

"Ah...yes... and your suspicions are right, by the way, he is having you watched, though we are not watched by Ministry people right now," the mysterious figure said. "We could perform this little favour, as a show of goodwill towards you. Do you have any particular time in mind...Ah, you believe that if Percy Weasleys dies at your wedding, people will be less inclined to believe that you were behind it," the figure said, reading his mind. "And you want to test our strength as well. I see it was wise to contact you. Your mind works in the right way!"

Draco was going to ask a few questions, but the figure cut him off on both accounts. "No, mind reading cannot be taught to another, for it is a highly rare inborn gift, and only three wizards are currently capable of it...and we will contact you, when the time is right. Oh and you might want to owl the girl a romantic present. You underestimate her intelligence. She wasn't completely convinced by your act!"

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"I'm sorry Hermione!" Ron said, looking at the floor. "I've been a fool. I reckon what came over Harry probably would have happened to me to if I'd been in his shoes. I hope you can forgive me?" he asked, looking hopeful.

Hermione just looked at him dumbfounded.

"Hermione...Hermione...Hermione...wake up!" Someone was screaming and hammering her door.

Her eyes snapped open, and the image of Ron faded into the back of her mind. It had only been a dream, of course. Ron would never come around like that. It had been wishful thinking on her part.

"Hermione!" She now recognised the voice as her annoying housemate Heidi's. What did that nose in the air snob want now?

"Alohomora!" she heard Heidi say, and the doors to her room suddenly burst open.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Hermione asked angrily.

"One of our Orbital Eyes monitored a huge spike of magical energy in the Sahara!" she said, her face shining with delight. "It has Harry's signature...he's alive!" she squealed as she launched herself on top of Hermione, and hugged the bewildered, bushy-haired girl.

"What?" Hermione mumbled, thinking that maybe she wasn't awake yet.

"Didn't you hear a word I said! Harry's alive! Come on to the Citadel...I'll show you!" she said, dragging Hermione out of her bed.

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked sceptically, waking up quickly. Maybe it was some kind of a sick joke. "April Fool's was yesterday, you know!"

Heidi looked hurt. "I know you and I don't get along very well, but I can't believe you would think that of me."

"I'm sorry." Hermione sighed. "But are you absolutely sure?"

"You've trained with the analysts! You know how thorough they are!" Heidi said.

"I know...and I know they couldn't find him after he disappeared," she pointed out.

"I know," Heidi said impatiently. "But they are positive."

"Listen, I want to believe he's alive as much as you do, but maybe someone just found his wand at the grave site. You remember those fanatics who tried to dig up his body. Maybe they found the wand and chose not to tell us, and now someone's using it."

"That individual would have to be as powerful as Harry is to cause such a large power spike. Clara said so!"

Hermione smiled, and her heart felt like it was about to pop. Maybe Harry was alive! "All right then. I'll be right over. Just give me a chance to shower."

Hermione made her way to the Control Room as quickly as the tight security would allow, where the analysts and special golems and even a select few non-Ranger personnel were working feverishly. She had missed all the displays and consoles in the room, and she missed working with these analysts to catalogue and classify all the dangerous elements, before dispatching teams of Intel field operatives and Combat Rangers to deal with the threats. She looked

at the large holographic projection of the Sahara and saw a blinking blue spot.

Her Brazilian housemate, Clara, pointed at the spot as she hurried by. "That's where the energy surge occurred."

Hermione nodded. "But we've lost him, haven't we?" she asked. She had worked with the analysts long enough to be able to sense their frustration in the air when something wasn't going as planned.

Lieutenant Li, a Chinese witch with a deeply wrinkled face and full head of grey hair, even though she was just in mid-forties, turned around to look at her. "We are certain it was Potter's wand. But we cannot be certain it was Potter."

Hermione frowned. That fact by itself raised a lot of questions. If it wasn't Harry, how did whoever acquired the wand, do it? Due to some kind of magical interference, the Rangers hadn't been able to remove the rubble entombing Harry. If it was Harry, why hadn't he immediately sought contact? Maybe he'd lost his memory? She shook her head. It just didn't make sense.

A dishevelled-looking Commander Nehanda Nomvete hobbled into the control room in a long night dress, drawing curious glances from her subordinates. She obviously hadn't bothered to change or touch up her appearance. "What is the situation, Lieutenant?"

"A large magical energy surge. Positive identification of the focussing tool as Harry Potter's wand, but nothing more. Our Orbital Eyes cannot detect him now."

"He was wearing a Confundus Amulet when he disappeared, wasn't he?" Nomvete asked.

Li nodded. "But it was tuned so that our equipment would not be hampered by it. In fact, it doubled as a tracking device."

Nomvete smiled slowly. "That's what I meant! I may be old but I'm not completely ignorant of all the capabilities of the magical toys our artificers have invented, you know!"

"Ah, of course," Lieutenant Li said, obviously embarrassed.

"Maybe he changed the frequency?" a hopeful Heidi offered.

Hermione sighed in exasperation. "Now why would he do that, honestly?" It was as she feared...someone must have got their hands on his wand, and that someone had to be very powerful. "We have to find out who it is, and what his intentions are. I think it isn't Harry. If it were, he would have contacted us."

Li sighed. "Once again, an excellent deduction! Pity you left us to become a nurse, Granger."

"Hermione flushed red. "I am not a nurse!" she muttered.

"I want a team dispatched to investigate what is going on there," Nomvete said. Li started to protest, but the old witch cut her off. "I know we can't spare anybody, according to the duty roster. It will have to be a volunteer mission."

"Count me in!" Hermione said quickly.

Nomvete shook her head. "We do not know what we are dealing with, and I am not about to send a trainee into such a situation."

"But Commander, if it really is Harry, I can help."

"Nice try, Granger, but you said it yourself, it probably isn't." She looked at the Hawaiian analyst, Noelani Winters, who was sitting at a console nearby. "Code Delta. Issue a full recall. Cancel any leave the Rangers might have and call them to the Citadel. Patch these images through to the main briefing amphitheatre. I want to be able to brief everybody in an hour. And get Commander Ironheart over here!"

"Would you like Mayo with that?" Winters muttered, as she got to work issuing the Code Delta and the recall of all off duty Rangers. Then she set up a connection to Ironheart's communications mirror.

Aria Ironheart's very displeased face appeared on Noelani's console.  
"What do you want?"

"Mrs Ironheart..." she began.

"Donovan is busy. Don't bother us!"

Hermione glanced around as she heard various Rangers groan. She knew Aria Ironheart was a notoriously difficult woman to deal with. It was no secret that she was trying to pressure her husband into retiring, and she didn't like it when any Rangers called her home.

"But..."

"I told you, he's busy!" the woman snapped and the mirror went blank.

"Call again," Nomvete said calmly. "Let it flash as long as is necessary."

Noelani hesitantly complied, and after a few minutes they were again staring at Aria's glaring face.

"I told you..."

Nomvete shoved Noelani out of the way and fixed her stare on Aria.  
"Now listen you shrew! We have a serious emergency, and we need Donovan over here now! I want you to get him, and if you don't, I'll come down to the city myself, and I swear by all that is holy, that Donovan will end up the city's most eligible senior widower if I do!" she hissed. "So don't make me come down there!"

The other woman visibly paled and nodded, before hurrying off to get her husband.

Cheers, applause and whistles burst out all around the Control Room as Nomvete backed away from Noelani's console.

She beamed. "I've waited thirty long years to do that!"

Hermione had never seen this many Rangers assembled. There were about ninety Rangers in all, and about thirty of them were out in the field at the moment. Most of the ones she knew were out on missions, so she saw a lot of unfamiliar faces. The Control Room had to remain fully staffed, so no on-duty analysts were present, and to her surprise the artificers who weren't out on a mission didn't show up either. In fact, she had rarely seen Helga lately.

The amphitheatre, which could hold a comfortable forty, was filled to capacity. In the upper seats, Hermione saw Heidi and a confused-looking Galatea sitting and quietly discussing some things, probably speculating about what was going to be done. She ascended the steps to join them.

The present Captains and Lieutenants were sitting in the front rows. She recognised the German Captain Faust, the head of the Combat Rangers, like Harry had been, stroking his handlebar moustache. She didn't see Captain Sharif and guessed that he couldn't leave his post in the medical wing, since there were no other Medical Rangers in the Citadel, besides Galatea and herself.

There were three Lieutenants she only knew by name and face, but had never interacted with, and most of the Rangers present were the off duty Intel Analyst Rangers, and the Intel Field Rangers and Combat Rangers in between missions. All of them were staring at the projection that was being redirected from the Control Room.

Ironheart and Nomvete walked in, Nomvete in uniform this time, and everybody rose and saluted, sitting back down after the two most senior Ranger returned their salute.

Nomvete pointed at the blinking blue dot. "Most of you have heard by now what that represents," she began. "Our Orbital Eyes have registered a huge surge of magical energy, focussed by what has been positively identified as Harry Potter's wand. However, evidence indicates that it may not have been Harry Potter who used the wand. Our reasons for concern are obvious. The amount of energy channelled by the wand was so great, that it must have been a very powerful wizard. Powerful enough, to succeed in piercing the magical

interference field that obstructed our attempts at the recovery of Ranger Potter's body."

"You want us to find out who it is?" an African wizard called out.

"As most of you know, our artificers and non Ranger magical-engineers have been working tirelessly on two new ships...the Hurricane and the Typhoon. As some of you might have deduced from their names, they differ from our other four ships in the manner that these are designed for combat," Ironheart said.

"You all realise that it is imperative that we find out what caused that magical energy surge, and find out what its intentions are," Nomvete continued. "I want volunteers to man the Hurricane, which was completed yesterday, to go and find this being."

"You speak as though you are not sure if it is a wizard." Sahid Khan, a veteran combat Ranger from Pakistan frowned.

"We aren't." Nomvete nodded. "Only Voldemort and Potter had that kind of power in recent times, and only Voldemort unleashed it in the registered quantity. It is probably a wizard, though, since he was able to use the wand, but it would be unwise to dismiss other possibilities."

"Like humanoid demons?" Ranger Gavin Carey asked. Hermione had met him after Harry's memorial service, but had never seen him since.

"Like humanoid demons." Ironheart nodded.

The briefing room erupted in murmurs, and Ironheart raised his hands to calm them down. "Now you understand the urgency of the situation. All of you are on duty effective immediately, until this matter is resolved. Every able Ranger will be deployed to that sector in a monitoring capacity. Combat Rangers will be paired up with Intel field operatives. Assignments will be given to you tomorrow. Those of you who have relatives in the city are not allowed to speak to them about this. Just cancel your plans, and give no hints about the magnitude of the situation. It will only alarm them."



Hermione frowned. She had no doubt that a few observant people in the city must have noticed the sudden absence of Rangers on leave in the city. It was already a little late for Ironheart's words of caution.

The senior Ranger looked in their direction. "Ranger Gravenstein?"

Heidi swallowed and nodded.

"Time to show us how good you are. You have to spin a suitable story to quiet suspicious minds. For now, you can tell them that we are embarking on a large scale exercise."

"Yes sir!" The Austrian woman nodded.

"Good. Go...now!"

Heidi rushed down the steps and swept out of the room.

Nomvete cleared her throat. "Now, about the volunteers to form the principal investigation party."

Hermione's hand shot up. "I'm the only medical wizard available!" she said quickly. "Ranger Angelou and Captain Sharif are needed here!"

"All right then," Nomvete said, with great reluctance.

Sahid Khan rose. "I'll go!"

"And I!" Caleb Mordecai called out.

Hermione felt a bit more at ease now that she knew she'd be going with Khan and Mordecai. They were the best Combat Rangers, and very experienced.

"You will need an Intelligence operative," a witch from one of the Russian States, judging from her accent, said.

"That is enough!" Ironheart smiled. "It looks like we have a team. Lieutenant Gaal will be the Ranger in charge and Ranger al-Kuwari will also be going."

Hermione frowned. She didn't think it was standard procedure that two Artificer Rangers were being sent on one mission. She guessed that the ship they were going to use still had to be tested, so Ironheart was sending them along in case any problems with the operation of the ship presented themselves.

Hermione also felt a bit inadequate since she was 'a not even official Ranger', among veteran 4th class Rangers and a Lieutenant. She sighed.

"Volunteers, be ready to ship out in six hours," Ironheart called. "Report to the hangars."

The two Commanders left, and the Rangers poured out of the amphitheatre.

"Are you sure about this, Hermione?" Galatea asked, as she and Hermione made their way to the medical wing.

"There is no turning back now, is there." Hermione sighed. "Someone has to be there in case of injury. The Sahara didn't seem like a good place for you, so I volunteered instead. Your workload with Max will increase, though. But don't worry. I'll give you all my notes. I think we can boost the power of yesterday's potion by adding more lacewings and salamander blood. In theory, that is! I wouldn't give it to Max just yet. It has to be tested first."

Galatea didn't say anything, and Hermione gave her a sidelong glance, noticing that the older woman was on the verge of tears.

"What's wrong?"

Galatea's lips trembled. "I'm afraid Max will never wake up." She sniffed and wiped away the tear that was rolling down her cheek. I know it is silly of me to worry about this, especially with that thing out there...that has Harry's wand."

Hermione grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze. "We'll find something that works! We'll bring him out of it."

"I wish I were that optimistic."

"Don't lose hope, Galatea. Never lose hope."

Seven hours later, the Hurricane was hurtling through the skies over the Sahara desert and Hermione was able to look over the controls of this new ship. They looked very similar to the controls of the older ships.

Al-Kuwari explained the workings of the ship to her. Like the other Cruisers, this ship had a tank full of potion that ran through conduits all over the ship. This had to be done because it took massive amounts of magic to animate something this large, and the potion regulated the flow of magic. Over time, the potion degenerated and had to be replaced by a fresh batch, and the more magic the ship used, the more quickly the potion degenerated. It was much like fuel.

At the moment, they were running silent and invisible, and those two features barely consumed magic, compared to shields, and Port Key mode, for example, where the ship would instantly transport anyone anywhere in a flash.

"The degeneration process is point one percent faster than anticipated," Gaal said. "That's not good."

"Relax, Janos," Yousef al-Kuwari said. "What is point one percent?"

"It may be an indication that more things may go wrong, on a much larger scale."

"Do you always worry when things are going well?"

"I don't have time to worry when they're not," Gaal said evenly. "There, I see the problem! The targeting charms were on."

Hermione turned her attention towards Caleb, who was talking to Valentina Malkova, a round-faced Belo-Russian witch.

"...Harry Potter and Okan Izzet. And Wolfe's gone crazy!" He sighed. "My wife asked me to quit, because she thought they were signs that my number was up next. I can't really blame her for feeling that way, but I can't quit. If we don't do this, evil will overrun the world in no time at all!"

"You do not have to tell me." Malkova nodded sympathetically. "I was married too, briefly, but my ex-husband could not cope with my lifestyle. So your wife left?"

Mordecai nodded. "She's staying with her parents in Israel..."

This gave Hermione a lot to think about. Maybe she'd be better off by herself. Being a Ranger was very tough on the individual, and even tougher on the family. It could be considered miraculous that over half of them were married!

"We're here!" Yousef said, as the ship slowed down and hovered over a spot in the dune-sea. It was the spot where the power surge originated. "Scanning...I don't see anything!" he said, sounding completely shocked. "The detection equipment is malfunctioning. I knew we should have let Helga reinforce the charms...she isn't experienced enough..."

"The detection charms are working fine," Gaal interrupted him. "This is just like India!"

"The spot where Harry was buried?" Hermione asked.

Gaal nodded.

Hermione's mind was working in overdrive. Harry had disappeared in an area where for some reason, magic didn't work. Now, Harry's wand reappeared again, in a similar area. "Lieutenant, could you please scan the dune to the right of this spot?"

"Why?" the ageing Hungarian Ranger asked.

"Don't you want to know how large the area of distortion is?"

"Oh, right," the old Ranger said. "Always good to have an analyst with you when you don't think like one yourself...thought didn't even cross my mind. I have to get out of the workshop a bit more often." He grinned. "Good to have you with us."

Hermione blushed. "It's just the way I think."

"Readings are crystal clear." Al-Kuwari frowned. "I know exactly how many sand-fleas reside in that dune."

"It looks like the whole blank area is about four by four metres," Gaal concluded. "It's time we inform the Citadel of our findings."

"I'm setting up a connection with the Citadel...the Control Room should be seeing our telemetry right...now!" Yousef al-Kuwari reported. He barely finished his sentence, when Ironheart's face appeared on his console.

"I don't know what kind of information you're sending us...but it certainly stirred things up around here. What did you find, Janos?"

"A magical blank spot similar to the one we found in India, Commander. We don't know if we can connect this to India, or Potter, but it is highly curious."

"I agree, Janos. But there is no sign of whatever caused that energy surge, is there?"

"Nothing whatsoever..."

"Hold it...we're picking up another spike," Ironheart said, looking away from the screen, and Hermione saw his brow knot up in worry. "Oh dear...."

"What is it, sir?" Gaal and al-Kuwari asked in unison.

"It's in Petra, Jordan!" Ironheart sighed "And it is definitely hostile! You have to get there as soon as possible. Standby for further instructions, C&C out!"

"You heard the Commander," Gaal said as the Ironheart's image faded. "Prepare for Port-Key mode."

"Are you insane? That hasn't been tested yet!" the younger artificer countered.

"We don't have that luxury, Yousef! Don't worry, the charm on this ship is identical to that of the older cruisers. It'll work!"

Hermione wasn't at ease about the whole situation, and she crossed her fingers as the two Artificers prepared the ship for instantaneous Trans-location to the city of Petra. She felt a sudden jerk, and seconds later the view outside the main view-port was completely different. She saw the mountainous region that held the city of Petra. In ancient times, the city was a popular resting spot for traders, and Muggles thought it was now deserted, while it actually held a wizarding settlement three and a half times the size of Hogsmeade, though not nearly as large as Eldorado.

"See? No problem," Gaal said reassuringly.

"Oh, we do have a problem!" said al-Kuwari, glancing at one of his displays. "He's still here!"

"Err, not that I doubt Ranger Khan and Ranger Mordecai's skill, but shouldn't we wait for reinforcements?" Hermione asked.

Khan, Mordecai and Malkova stepped onto a large circle, and the circle lowered them to the cargo deck.

"Relax, they won't engage it," Gaal said soothingly as he took the ship in for a landing. "They'll use invisibility charms, and their V.E.G.'s will transmit whatever they see back to us!"

"But what if that thing has enough sense to turn itself invisible?"

"Were you paying attention when we taught you about our equipment, in November?" Al-Kuwari frowned.

"Oh, right!" Hermione blushed. She had forgotten that seeing invisible creatures was one of the many things these goggles could do.

Minutes ticked by, and the three Rangers watched tensely, as the images transmitted to them by the other three Rangers were showing up on displays. She saw a light flash, and knew that the images were passed on to C&C at the Citadel.

She gasped as she saw several bodies...men...women...even children, strewn around. She saw one of the children move, and Valentina, through whose goggles they were seeing those images, was rushing over to help the child. "Oh, what is this monster?"

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## Confusions and Confessions

### Chapter 11

Magical disaster-relief teams from all over the world poured into Petra, Jordan.

It sure had taken them long enough! Hermione thought grimly. Six hours had passed before the help had reached the city.

Some other Rangers had been rushed over to the scene. A Scottish Combat Ranger named Magnus Brody had assisted her while she treated the many injured people, and Ethan Johnson, a Sixth Class Intel Field Ranger from the United States had made sure that she got the things she needed to keep doing her job. With old Captain Sharif's help, after he arrived on scene, Hermione managed to save ten wizards and four goblins who otherwise would have died.

The Citadel was now occupied only by the analysts in C&C, some artificers, Galatea in the medical wing, and the non-Ranger personnel in the various divisions.

Takupai Orzaiz changed into his Animagus form and slithered through the narrow cracks to see if any more casualties remained buried beneath the rubble while other rescue wizards looked on in amazement, and to Hermione's annoyance, forgot to do their jobs! Docmor the Diligent, a half-goblin Intelligence Ranger who specialised in intrusion and curse breaking like Wortelgraaf swept the blast area with highly sensitive magic detectors to collect any leftover magical traces, before the meddlesome wizards from the various Departments of Mysteries arrived and started tainting the traces with their clumsy antics.

Heidi had once told Hermione that the United States Ministry of Magic had recently petitioned for more transparency into the operations of the Order of Illumination. Apparently, they felt threatened somehow. Other countries like India and Australia, Greece and Russia, which were very grateful to the Order for solving some major problems of theirs, spoke in their favour, and the International Confederation of Wizards turned the petition down.



She shuddered to think how the Order's spin-doctors, that's what Heidi and her crew were nicknamed, were going to deal with this one. This disaster of epic proportions would surely rock the wizarding world to its core! Not even the Death Eaters had ever come close to doing something like this, at least, to a wizarding community. There had been plenty of Muggle killings though, but this wizard didn't seem to discriminate like that.

Hermione sat down on a stone bench next to a Fifth Class Ranger she only knew by face. The markings on her grey uniform revealed her to be an Intelligence Field Operative, and the woman stuck out her gloved hand. "Aina Ndour!"

"Hermione Granger!" Hermione said, shaking her hand. "Find anything?"

The woman, with closely cropped hair, and a very dark complexion, shook her head. "Nothing that could help us. You?"

Hermione massaged her temples. "The culprit Disapparated before the team managed to get a look at him. The witnesses are too traumatised to tell us anything." She sighed. "We'll just have to wait until it pops up again, somewhere." She shuddered at the thought of finding another situation like this one.

"Tired?" Gavin Carey, also present to aid in the search for clues, asked.

"We have to catch this monster, Gavin. Seven people died, at least, that's the body count so far."

"Eight, actually." The Welsh Ranger nodded grimly. "Seemingly at random. They were simply at the wrong place at the wrong time."

"No!" Hermione said, more fiercely than she'd actually meant to, and Gavin took a step backwards involuntarily. Hermione exhaled slowly. "These people were home! Not at the wrong place at the wrong time."

"I had hoped that Voldemort would be the last monster of this kind to plague us in my lifetime. It seems we're not destined to know peace," he said sadly.

"Look, Commander Ironheart is here!" Ndour said, looking surprised. "What is he doing here?"

"I can't even remember the last time he went out on a mission. Three years ago, was it?" Gavin looked at Aina Ndour for answers.

The witch nodded. "Something like that. I wonder what he's doing here."

Hermione ran her hand through her bushy brown hair, which she wore in a hastily-done ponytail. What was he doing there?

She watched him as he accompanied another Fifth class Ranger, the distraught Nassir al-Hasan, who was a Petra native, to a trembling old wizard. Looking on as Ironheart knelt in front of the man and looked into his eyes, she suddenly realised what he was doing. She didn't know exactly what mind reading entailed, but from the manuscripts she'd read on the subject, she knew mind readers were able to pull images out of people's minds. The old man was a witness, and Commander Ironheart was attempting to find out who was behind it.

The Commander concentrated and looked into the eyes of the old wizard, searching for clues. This went on for a minute or so, and the sweat poured down Ironheart's forehead with the effort involved. Then he gasped and looked away, closing his eyes and getting up shakily. The look of shock wore off, and shadow fell over his face. He abruptly turned and walked away, and his voice sounded in Hermione's ear-piece. "Rangers, let's get out of here. The relief teams can handle it from here. Regroup at the Citadel. We have a maximum emergency. Code Omega!"

Hermione's gut went cold as she got up and followed Lieutenant Gaal to the Hurricane. "What does it mean?" she asked, as she caught up with him.

Gaal briskly continued to walk towards one of the exit points. "It means, that we have an emergency on a scale previously unimagined."

"Bigger than Voldemort?"

"The Commander seems to think so."

That answer gave Hermione goose bumps. If the most senior Ranger was that upset...

The twenty or so Rangers who hadn't come in the Hurricane, clustered around Port Keys and were transported to the Apparition point deep within the bowels of the Citadel, while Hermione and her team boarded the Cruiser and followed them.

Hermione wondered what the Commander had seen that had him so spooked. She dreaded the answer to that question, and she knew that whatever it was, it probably needed to be stopped dead as soon as possible.

When they touched down in the underground hangar at the Citadel, she saw that the other Cruisers were all present. She knew they hadn't been scheduled to be back, so she guessed they must have been recalled. Things must be really bad! She knew this, because she had once read through the Orders archives for some background reading, and even Voldemort hadn't merited a full recall. Or maybe the Commander was just being cautious this time around?

Flanked by Khan and Mordecai, she walked into the Briefing Amphitheatre again, finding most Rangers already present, and many more familiar faces were among them this time around. The Kelly brothers, Lilia and Mayumi were all there.

Hermione sat down in the front row, directly looking into Commander Ironheart's worried face. She realised that she had sat down amidst a whole bunch of ranking officers, and she felt distinctly uncomfortable. She started to get up, but a hand on her back gently pushed her back into her seat. Captain Irina Kovalenko, to whom the hand belonged,

gave her a brief and reassuring smile. Rank was apparently of no importance at the moment.

The Commanders looked up and Hermione followed their gaze. The ceiling opened up, and down floated a golden throne very similar to the Headmaster's Chair at the teachers' table at Hogwarts, with a very old woman sitting on it. Even though Hermione had never seen her before, she knew who it was.

The throne thumped on the floor and an impregnable silence settled over the room. The old woman took a deep breath. "My Rangers...there is a darkness, greater than the one we fight. It is the darkness of a soul that has lost its way."

Hermione frowned. What was the First Ranger saying?

The old woman waved her wand and a glowing blue sphere with a diameter of about a metre came floating out of the hole in the ceiling, and ended up hovering in front of Ironheart. "Through the Orb of the First Ones, Donovan will show you...what he has seen."

Hermione gripped her seat tightly. Now they would see what they were up against!

Ironheart touched the Orb, and a flash ensued, projecting his thoughts. A hooded figure with black hair protruding from under the hood and a strange greenish outfit. It threw curses around indiscriminately, raised its head screaming triumphantly at the destruction it caused, and the hood fell back revealing messy, shoulder-length black hair. Then it turned around and looked straight at the wizard from whom these thoughts came. Framed by the mass of black hair was a thin and pale face with the coldest green eyes she'd ever seen. They were filled with pure rage and hatred, and unease settled over her being as she realised that the wizard looked very familiar. Some Rangers gasped, the Kelly brothers groaned, but mostly the Rangers just stared at the image stonily. It was obvious that they'd recognised him.

"What's going on...what is this all about?" a raspy voice cut through the quiet, and everybody looked at the entrance to the briefing room.

Leaning heavily against the side of the entryway stood a thin and weak-looking, but otherwise healthy, Max Wolfe. He was dressed only in pyjamas and watching the image through narrowed eyes. A nurse hovered behind him anxiously, tugging him by the hem of his pyjama top, but Wolfe paid her no attention. Hermione's brief gladness at seeing him was shoved aside by the shock that rippled through her mind as she belatedly recognised the green-eyed wizard. It was too much for her mind to endure, and she absently saw the white marble floor rush up to meet her.

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Hermione returned to consciousness and immediately recognised the smell of the room she was in. She slowly opened her eyes, and saw Lilia, Galatea and Serafina bending over her with concerned looks on their faces.

"Stand back ladies, give her some room to breathe," Sharif's voice sounded, and the ladies parted to let him through. He leaned in. "Hermione, do you know where you are?"

"Harry!" Hermione whimpered, as her vision blurred with tears. "It can't be Harry! It can't...he would never...he...he..." She had trouble breathing and started to hyperventilate, and Sharif flicked his wand to produce a bag she could breathe into. Galatea held it to her face until she calmed down.

"They aren't ruling out polyjuice potion but that doesn't replicate a wizard's power, and that wizard was very powerful," Lilia said sadly.

"You don't believe it's him do you?" Hermione asked hopefully, and the Rangers around her looked to the floor, as if they were trying to hide something, and Hermione caught the meaning of their body language. "I don't believe you people!" she screamed angrily.

"He can't be under the Imperius Curse. You know he can resist that," Lilia said, trying to sound reasonable.

"So you just assume that he turned evil of his own free will!" Hermione hissed viciously.

"I don't!" she heard Wolfe's raspy voice say. He coughed to clear it. "They must have done something to him. He may be possessed."

"Yes!" Hermione said quickly, looking around for Wolfe, and finding him sitting in the corner next to her bed, where he'd been out of her field of vision.

"But Ranger Wolfe...the Imperius, he can resist..." Serafina started to say before Wolfe cut her off.

"They had plenty of time to work on him and use techniques that would leave a much more lasting impression than the Imperius," he said dryly. "I don't think he's doing it out of his own free will, or that he decided to turn evil just like that. I simply refuse to believe it."

"I believe I agree with Ranger Wolfe. Harry Potter had too much strength of character to simply turn to evil easily." Sharif nodded solemnly. "However, how do we prove that?"

"We have a more immediate concern. If the press gets wind of this...then the trouble will really start, and it won't matter whether or not he was in some way altered by powerful magic," Serafina pointed out.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Sharif said, and he got up to leave. "Come on, Wolfe, ladies. Let us give Hermione some rest."

"Sir, could I stay a little longer...I'd like to talk to Ranger Granger."

Sharif managed to quirk a brief smile despite the gravity of the situation. "Well, do you have any objections, Ranger Granger?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Galatea, could you stay as well?"

The white haired witch looked surprised by the request, and she nodded mutely, waiting until Lilia, Sharif and Serafina left, and closing the door behind them.

Wolfe looked at Galatea, then at Hermione and finally at the floor. "I want to thank you for what you did for me, Ranger Gr..."

"Hermione!" she interrupted. "And no thanks are needed. I was doing what I was trained to do, you know...just doing my duty."

"Really? Galatea said you did much of it on your own time!" Wolfe said seriously, and nodded to Galatea, who blushed a little.

Hermione followed suit. "I was nothing...really!" she mumbled.

"And you, Galatea...thank you!" Wolfe said quietly.

"What for?" she asked nervously.

"For being by my side, and singing to me. I heard your songs...it was the contact I needed...you kept me from sliding further into the abyss." He straightened himself, for a moment looking impossibly like his grandfather, Hermione thought. As she thought this, Wolfe's head snapped around and he looked into her eyes. "You must be mistaken, I am no relation of Commander Ironheart's." he said, completely nonplussed.

"Oh, of course you're not." Hermione said, trying not to sound too shocked. He had inherited the gift! Oh, she had to be careful what she was thinking, but this time he didn't seem to react.

He just got up. "Well, I'll see you around, I suppose. You can come by my quarters later on, and we can talk about Harry, and how we are going to deal with this whole situation."

"Or you could come by our place!" Galatea offered, casting a peculiar glance at Hermione, that made her very uncomfortable. "We moved out of the Citadel with a bunch of girls, and we're living in a townhouse on the sixth tier. Your grandmother is staying with us. She came to visit you too!"

Wolfe's face brightened considerably, and now that the perpetual frown was gone Hermione was again reminded of Ironheart. Oh, she was thinking it again, but Wolfe failed to react this time too. "Yes," Hermione said quickly, "and she spoiled us all with her spectacular cooking."

Wolfe nodded happily. "Yes, she's a very good cook!" The frown returned. "Unfortunately, the meeting must take place in a secure location!"

"You're right!" Hermione said. "I'm sure Galatea can help us with some ideas as well. Three heads are better than two!"

"Of course." Wolfe nodded, and for the first time ever, Hermione noticed the tiniest smile on his lips, and the jealous look that came over Galatea's face when Wolfe asked Hermione to meet with him, vanished instantly.

They waited until Wolfe's footsteps had died away to start talking.

"Good Lord, he read my mind!" Hermione gasped. "I was thinking how much he looked like the Commander, in a grandfather context!"

"So that's what his reaction was all about!" Galatea said, suddenly understanding.

"But he only reacted that one time." Hermione frowned. "I couldn't help but think those thoughts a couple of times, but he didn't seem to read those."

"Well, when my emphatic abilities started surfacing, they weren't always present," Galatea said thoughtfully. "They came and went. And as far as I know, mind readers need eye-contact, or at least line of sight, to read one's mind. Or they need to be really close, say...no further than four feet."

"That could be it." Hermione nodded. "Oh dear, but we need to tell Commander Ironheart about this."



"Why?"

"Well, we have to assume that Max' ability will stabilise over time, and that he'll be able to read minds. I don't think he ought to find out about his heritage by reading one of our minds. He deserves to be told."

"Right." Galatea nodded. "We have to see the Commander as soon as possible."

A brief silence followed, and both women retreated to their own private thoughts for a while, until Hermione spoke. "Hey Galatea?"

"Hmmm?" the other woman replied absently.

"You really have to do something about your jealousy!"

"What?" Galatea frowned.

"Come on...don't play dumb with me! If looks could kill, I'd be a pile of ashes right now! I perfectly understand the look you gave me after Max only asked me to come and talk to him!"

Galatea smiled bashfully. "Oh, sorry about that."

"It's okay!" Hermione said graciously. "But you really need to get that under control. You could teach Aria Ironheart a thing or two about possessiveness!" she teased. "Seriously though, he may not fall head over heels in love with you, like you want him to. Life isn't a fairy tale. He may never kiss you, and you may never live happily ever after!" She immediately regretted her choice of words, because Galatea started to sob uncontrollably, so Hermione rose from the bed and walked over to her and gave her a hug. "I didn't mean to sound so rude, but it's true."

"But I love him, Hermione."

"Do you?" Hermione asked seriously. "Why do you love him? How can you be sure that this isn't some kind of obsession?"

Galatea wiped her tears away. "Everybody thinks that I only went out on two missions, and that I never left the ship." she began.

Hermione nodded. "But it isn't true?"

"It isn't. Two years ago, a Nundu threatened a village in Africa. Max, Caleb, Okan, Patience Gedeon and Tarana Oliseh went after it, and being a rookie and given my sensitivity to light, I was instructed to stay on the ship."

"But you didn't." Hermione saw where this was going.

"No. The problem turned out to be the Nundu finding me before I found the team. I would have been dead if Wolfe hadn't distracted the Nundu with an extremely foolish action. He ran up to it and kicked it in the teeth."

"Wait a minute, how could he get in so close? I thought a Nundu's breath killed everything near it." she said, remembering Newt Scamander's book about magical creatures.

"The artificers have created special suits that enable us to get in close," Galatea explained. "Anyway, the Nundu could have torn him apart, but he still distracted it to save my life, while I should have paid the price for my stupidity."

"Hold on...but a suit that protects you from a Nundu's breath also protects you from the sun, doesn't it?" Hermione asked, puzzled, and then she understood. "They ordered you to stay for your own safety!"

Galatea smiled sadly. "I realised that as I waited for them, then I decided to slip on a suit and prove myself. I guess they trusted me to obey, otherwise they wouldn't have left the suit lying around. The thing is...I wanted to prove myself," she said miserably.

"I understand. But falling in love with him because he saved your life? That isn't a very solid basis for a relationship...well, it isn't enough," Hermione pointed out.

"I know, I know." She sighed. "At first, when I started training, I thought he was just arrogant, but after he saved my life I made an effort to get to know him. It took nine months before he opened up to me, but he finally did. He told me about his life...oh Hermione, I was in love before I fully realised what was happening. He was just so sad, and so determined!"

"Really, I had no idea." The rumour went that Galatea had liked Wolfe for his looks, and had been after him ever since. Hermione now understood Galatea's devotion a whole lot better. She let the information sink in.

"Now you know," Galatea said sadly.

Hermione nodded. "But what are you going to do about it?"

Galatea eyed her curiously. "What do you mean?"

Hermione smirked mischievously. "How are you going to get him to notice you?"

"I've tried everything! Hermione, I know him better than anyone in the Citadel and the city...save maybe Commander Ironheart."

"Okay, you were always there for him, but Galatea, he's a man! Men...it's their cosmic duty to be dense! Men are strange beings, and Max Wolfe might just be the strangest of them all. You need to show him that he can't take you for granted. Buy an enticing dress and flirt with other blokes in front of him."

"But that would be...slutty!" Galatea said sourly.

"Of course not! You can be enticing and not be slutty. But trust me...you need to do something to get him to notice you." She sighed, remembering what she'd had to go through to get Ron to act on his feelings. With Ginny as an accomplice, she'd made sure he saw her flirting with a dozen guys...and it seemed to be working. Of course, things went wrong when Ron walked in on her and Harry in a perfectly innocent situation, but a rather visually compromising position.

"Hermione, we need to talk!"

What about, Harry?" Hermione asked, looking up from a book on ancient vampires. She was staring at a picture of what Hannibal Skaras presumably looked like.

"You've been behaving strangely lately," he said, his eyes narrowing to emerald slits.

Hermione swallowed. "Where's Ron?"

"In the kitchens," Harry said. "I loaned him my cloak so he could go and nick some food in the kitchens. Why? Does any of this have to do with him?"

Hermione paced around the common room and checked all the high backed chairs to make sure it was empty. Being a Prefect, she was expected to enforce the curfew, but she was rather relaxed about it, as long as no one was getting out of line too badly. "Harry, I've been trying to get Ron to notice me."

Harry burst out laughing. "You got his attention all right! But he thinks your behaviour is a result of Parvati and Lavender finally rubbing off on you."

"And you didn't?" Hermione asked sceptically.

"I'm not as blind as he is. I had my suspicions...and Ginny told me." He shrugged and grinned.

"Why you..." Hermione playfully jumped him, and Harry fell back with her on top of him, taken by surprise. That was when Ron walked in, his face still covered with whipped cream.

"I can't believe you two!" he hissed. "Going at it behind my back!"

"Shut up, Weasley!" Harry snorted. "You and I both know I don't fancy Hermione that way," he said pointedly. "You shouldn't jump to conclusions like that, mate!"

"Right," Ron said, blushing profusely, but looking unconvinced

Things had sort of returned to normal after that, but the damage had been done. Even when she and Ron had finally got together, a shadow came over his face whenever she got physically close to Harry for whatever reason.

"So, did the flirting thing work for you?" Galatea asked, snapping her out of it.

"Not exactly, it sort of backfired...but your situation is different! I guess I'll have to come up with a better plan," Hermione said confidently. "Now, all we need is a plan that suits Max' personality. So we have to ask ourselves, what do we know about him?"

"Um, he never had a girlfriend."

"He didn't? Wait, you're right!" Hermione slapped her forehead. How could she have overlooked Wolfe's childhood? That was the problem...he didn't know how to react to his emotions! "Okay, this isn't going to be easy. And we should put operation Wolfe on hold anyway. There are more pressing matters."

"Operation Wolfe...how exiting!" Galatea shivered, gleefully rubbing her hands together.

Hermione raised an eyebrow teasingly. "Calm down woman...you could use a cold shower."

Galatea composed herself. "You're right, I must stay calm!"

"Better!" Hermione nodded, as the young woman settled down. "Now, if you don't mind, I need my rest. If I don't look rested in the morning, they'll keep me here even longer!"

"I'll see you tomorrow, then?"

"Bring me a fresh uniform!" Hermione nodded.

"I will! Goodnight Hermione."

"Sweet dreams, Galatea!" Hermione grinned, and Galatea turned crimson.

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A gentle hand shaking her shoulder woke Hermione up the next morning.

"Rise and shine."

Hermione opened her eyes and saw Galatea sitting next to her. "What time is it?" she asked, yawning.

"Nearly noon."

"Hmmm...I'm starving." Hermione said.

"We'll have lunch after you take a shower."

"Did you bring my uniform?"

"Yes, and I brought some your shower things as well," she said, holding up a little bag.

"Thanks." Hermione yawned, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "Where was Crookshanks?" she asked. She knew her pet was very territorial, and would fiercely guard her room while she was away. "He likes you well enough, but I can't believe he'd just let you into my room."

"He was sort of busy with Annabelle," Galatea giggled, turning slightly red.

Hermione laughed. Annabelle was Heidi's Nibelunge cat, and she knew Crookshanks was interested in her. "I see." She grabbed the tiny little bag Galatea had been holding up. "So, Doctor Angelou...am I discharged?"

After Galatea gave her a quick check-up and declared her healthy, Hermione took a shower, and as the two women were on their way to the mess hall, Galatea told Hermione that she'd have a couple of days off. Hermione was glad, since she could really use the time off. They passed the Physical Training Hall and saw Max fight a black golem, while Bill Quist, Nathan Kelly and Khan watched.

Hermione too stopped to watch, and saw that was Max wearing a sleeveless martial arts uniform. Hermione assessed that he looked very good in it...and to her secret embarrassment, her heart rate quickened a bit as she saw him spar with the lethal magically animated golem. She really hoped she wasn't blushing, because her face definitely felt warm...but she quickly pushed those thoughts away. There was nothing wrong with just looking...was there? It wasn't as if she was betraying Galatea in any way...

She remembered her training with golems too, but those had been white golems, used by beginners. There were also blue golems, green golems and red golems, each colour more difficult and dangerous to fight. The black golems had been charmed to be supernaturally strong and fast, and to Hermione's knowledge only three Rangers could use them for training: Khan, Quist and Max.

Hermione winced as she saw the golem's foot connect with his chest...something she found very strange. Max didn't seem to be as fast as he usually was. She really started to worry as the golem hit him with a rapid succession of punches and blood started to ooze from his mouth.

"Enough. End training sequence!" Khan bellowed, and the golem went slack immediately.

"Why did you do that? I could have taken it!" Max growled angrily. "I...I..." He dropped to his knees and coughed up some blood, and before Hermione fully understood that she was moving, her legs were carrying her towards him. Her knees buckled as she crossed a glowing white line. She realised the gravity must have been increased somewhat within the glowing white line.

"Ranger Khan, please remove the gravity spell."

"By authority of Sahid Khan, Ranger Fourth Class," Khan said, before muttering the appropriate spells, and Hermione felt the gravity return to normal as the lines stopped glowing. She knew that only a few Rangers had the clearance to start certain training methods, including the increase of gravity, and the magical crystal with the memories of a long-gone gym master only acknowledged the voices of those Rangers. That crystal functioned like the orb of the First Rangers, and several of these crystals were spread over the base. The library had a crystal containing the memories of a librarian, for example.

"Normal gravity has been restored, Ranger Khan," a projection of an old female Ranger said. "Will there be anything else?"

Hermione knelt beside Max, only to be shoved away so forcefully she skidded ten feet away. "Don't...touch me!" Then he looked at Khan angrily. "I could have taken the golem!"

"I doubt it," Khan said coolly.

Angry at being shoved away so rudely while trying to help, Hermione got to her feet and drew her wand. "You woke up from a coma yesterday! To say that you're out of shape would be an understatement. You shouldn't have been in here to begin with...you should've been resting...and you certainly shouldn't have been fighting a black golem under increased gravity. What in the bloody blazes are you trying to prove? Now you'll get your sorry bum back to the hospital right now, before I stun you and haul you down there myself!"

Max glowered at her, but in her anger Hermione wasn't the least bit impressed. She couldn't care less about the fact that he could probably still disarm her and grind her into tiny pieces.

"Granger is right," Khan said calmly. "Report to the medical wing. I don't want to see you in here until they've fixed you up, and I want to start a slow build up to your previous level."

"But..."



"Is that understood, Ranger?" Khan added menacingly.

Max nodded. "Understood...sir!" he said, with extreme reluctance.

Khan frowned. "Quist...make sure he gets there!"

"There's no need for that. Galatea and I will take it from here. Right?" Hermione asked, looking at Galatea, who was giving Max a withering look.

Galatea nodded.

Max got up and started walking out of the Hall, leaving Hermione and Galatea to give chase. They caught up with him outside, and Galatea exploded. "What were you doing in there, Max?"

"Training."

"You shouldn't be training yet," Galatea hissed. "Magic can't fix all the effects of a coma. We have only partially restored your body, but you're still not fit. Why didn't you listen to me?"

"I needed to get ready," he replied tersely.

"For what?" Hermione asked.

Max didn't answer. Instead he just marched towards the medical wing.

Galatea slowed down and gestured to Hermione to do the same. After Max was a good twenty feet away, she whispered, "Hermione, could you please fix him up? I have to see someone."

"Who?"

Galatea sighed. "Someone who might be able to talk some sense into him."

"Commander Ironheart?"

Galatea nodded.

"All right." Hermione nodded and then hurried to catch up to Max.

Hermione led Max to an examining room. "Get on the table," she barked. Her anger over his pushing himself too hard too soon was resurfacing.

"I'm fine," He barked back.

"So you always cough up blood!" Hermione snapped sarcastically. "Listen, in here you don't outrank me. Don't be such a baby...co-operate."

Max obviously wasn't happy with the comparison to an infant, but his jaw snapped shut and he sat on the table, removing his vest, and Hermione couldn't help but gasp as she saw the bruised mess beneath it. He had a couple of broken ribs...at least, and obviously he had some damage to his lungs. She wondered how and why he was still conscious, and as she looked at his face, she only saw the mask of control he'd always worn.

She sighed and put on a pair of examination goggles. These goggles could detect internal injuries, and made it much easier for the mediwizard or witch to treat the patient. A diagnostic spell told a mediwizard what was wrong, but with the help of these goggles, the treating wizard could actually see the injury, and Hermione knew that visualisation helped a lot when casting charms. In fact, the inability to see the injury was what made the treatment of internal damage so difficult.

As she'd suspected, he had five broken ribs and some damage to his lungs. She fixed the ribs first, and then the lungs, and to her satisfaction she saw his lungs opening up smoothly once more as they drew in air. "Is anything else bothering you?" she asked clinically, still looking for injuries through the goggles.

"My joints are a bit stiff."

"Well, what did you expect. You've been in a coma for a couple of months. If you'd been a Muggle, you'd still be flat on your back in bed,

and it would take weeks, if not months of physical therapy for you to become your old self again," Hermione explained.

"Fix it. I know there are spells that can do that."

Hermione shook her head. "Sorry. We can't pour too much magic into you. You'll have to recover the old fashioned way."

"Can't you at least fix my wrists...they're bothering me a lot."

Hermione sighed. "I really shouldn't...it would serve you right for being such a stubborn prat! She took his left hand first, and pointed her wand at his wrist, muttering an incantation. "How does it feel?" she asked, after finishing.

"Better." He said, as he rotated his wrist.

She took his other hand and repeated the process. Then she noticed that his knuckles didn't look well, having a few tiny fractures. She absently ran her fingers over his knuckles. "When did this happen...?" she started to ask, but as she looked up she saw that his heart was beating wildly. "Are you all right?" she asked worriedly. Maybe all the healing magic was having side effects.

"I'm uh...fine...why, is there something wrong?" he asked shyly.

Confused, Hermione let go of his hand, and immediately his heart started beating more slowly. She noted his strange reaction and grabbed his hand again, and his heart speeded up once more. The realisation hit her like a collapsible cauldron, and she quickly let go of his hand. "You're fine," she said quickly, taking off the goggles. "No more strenuous exercise for at least a week. Well, off you go!" she said, trying to push him out of the examination room.

"Are you sure?" he asked, resisting her efforts. "What about my hand?"

"What about it?"

"Well, I thought something was wrong with it."

"Nothing's wrong. Everything's just fine," she said, damning herself for the blush she felt creeping on her cheeks. "Why would anything be wrong?"

A concerned look appeared on Max's. "Maybe I should call Tea. You're all flushed and twitchy. Are you sure you recovered from yesterday's ordeal?"

"No!" Hermione snapped. "I'm fine. You don't have to call...Tea?" She wondered how long he'd been calling Galatea by a pet name, and why she was so annoyed by it. She wasn't jealous. She couldn't be! She was Hermione Granger, and Max was just a rude, messed up bloke who didn't know what was good for him! She did not like him. How could she? She hardly knew him. She would not join the ranks of the witches who swooned every time he walked into a room!

Max' cheeks flushed, like they had when Nathan and Gavin set him up, in September. Hermione thought it was kind of cute before she could stop herself from thinking it. "Yeah, that's what I call Galatea."

"So do you like her...Galatea?" Hermione inquired. She was slightly ashamed of this because it was none of her business, but she realised this could well be her only chance to have a normal conversation with Max. Besides, it shifted the topic away from her.

Max looked at the floor. "I don't know."

"You don't know? What do you mean by that?" Hermione sighed exasperatedly. "Of course you like her."

Max nodded. "You're right. She means a lot to me. She's always been there for me...and she got me out of the coma."

"She had help, you know!" Hermione said, feeling slightly annoyed for some reason she couldn't fathom. She couldn't believe Galatea had taken all the credit for that.

"Oh, she didn't take all the credit," Max said absently. "She told me you're the one who improved that restorative potion that got me out of the coma."

Hermione paled. It had happened again. Was it her place to tell him this? It had been mentioned at the dinner table with the Weasleys, and every Ranger now knew that Max was Commander Ironheart's grandson. The secret was out anyway...but maybe Ironheart wanted to tell Max himself. No...there wasn't any point in waiting. With his powers out of control, he could read her mind at any time, and that was no way for him to find out either!

She gathered her courage. "Max...I didn't say that out loud."

"What?" Max gave her a puzzled look.

"That bit about Galatea taking all the credit. I didn't say that out loud. You read my thoughts...or at least, you heard them...or sensed them, I'm not sure."

"What are you talking about?" He frowned.

"You can read minds, Max."

Max' eyes widened. "You mean, like Commander Ironheart?"

Hermione nodded. "In fact...you've inherited the gift from him. Remember yesterday...when I made that comment about how much you looked like him? Well, I hadn't been saying that out loud either. Max, he's your grandfather...your father's father. He told us when he heard what had happened to you. "

Max leaned on the table heavily, and Hermione saw that he no longer wore that mask of control. He had this confused, sad look on his face. "Why didn't he tell me?"

"I'm sure he had his reasons," Hermione said quickly.

"Yeah, he had his reasons all right," Max said bitterly. "I'm the indirect result of one of his past indiscretions."

"That is not true!" Hermione said vehemently. "He's very proud of you. He told me so!"

"Did he?" Max frowned.

"Well, not in so many words, but I could tell!" she reassured him as she threw her arm around his shoulder.

"Is everything all right?"

Hermione turned around and saw Commander Ironheart stand in the doorway.

"Commander..." Hermione started to salute, but he waved it off.

Instead, he locked eyes with his grandson, and Max gasped. They looked at each other for a full five minutes...and Hermione wondered what was going on. Were they communicating telepathically? She considered herself extremely lucky. She was pretty sure she was the first witch to see two mind readers communicating with each other.

It ended when Max let go of the examining table and engulfed his grandfather in a bone-crushing hug. Both men had tears in their eyes, and Hermione felt like reaching for a hanky too.

Ironheart wiped away his tears with his sleeve and smiled. "Well, my first act as a grandfather will be to advise you to take it easy. Go visit your grandmother...I can't believe you haven't done so already, you haven't seen her in a while."

Max' stomach rumbled. "Think she'll fix me lunch?"

"You can count on it." Ironheart smiled.

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## The Past stirs The Future

### Chapter 12

Max wasn't one for idle chat, Hermione ascertained. He just quietly walked beside her. They were circling through the fourth tier, where he was looking for a present for his grandmother. They came across a shop with a long queue of wizard, goblin, dwarf and elf children and Max frowned. "I don't remember this place."

Hermione smiled. The sign above the shop read: Zonko's & Weasley's Concordian Joke Shop. "It belongs to a friend of mine...he's a major shareholder in the joke shop chain. Would you like to go in?"

"I think my grandmother is a bit too old for jokes."

"Come on! What's the harm?" She grabbed his hand to drag him into the shop, but she felt resistance as his pose stiffened. He was looking down at their joined hands apprehensively. Hermione let go of his hand. "Sorry."

The tall Ranger's cheeks flushed. "It's okay," he mumbled.

He proceeded into the queue, the crowd of children parting for him, and Hermione followed in his wake. She'd noticed that many people gave him plenty of room to pass as he came by. He did have some sort of a predatory air about him, and Hermione guessed that was what caused people step aside for him.

"Hey you, wait in line just like everybody else," she heard George's voice say. Then the tone changed. "Wait, I know you! The distant cousin...Wolfe, right? Well, well, Sleeping Beauty... up and about again. When did you wake up?"

"Umm...I...well," Max was stammering, when Hermione came around from behind him. "Hi, George."

"Hermione! What brings you here?" George asked.

Hermione nodded to Max, who had stalked off and was now examining a bag of Ton Tongue Toffees. "Max and I are looking for something for his grandmother."

"I think I've got just the thing." George said, as he ducked beneath the counter and came up with a small box. Hermione saw a bunch of small containers. One for salt, one for pepper, and a bunch of unmarked ones. "They're for spices," he explained. "You fill them up with the spices, and they're charmed to recognise what's in them. The cook just has to say what he wants and the container floats over to him. But you've got to tickle the containers to get them to release their spices."

"Sounds funny." Hermione smiled.

"Have it on the house." George nodded. "As a thank you for that dinner she made us." He handed it to a short woman who looked remarkably goblinesque, to wrap up.

Max came up and stood beside Hermione. He nodded at the goblin woman. "Didi."

"Ranger Wolfe," the woman replied. "It is nice to see you are conscious once again."

Max nodded again, and stalked off into the store once more.

"A ray of sunshine, isn't he?" George whispered. "Is he Ron's replacement?"

Hermione blushed. "What makes you say that?"

"Just joking!" George grinned. "My, you're easy to bait lately."

After leaving the joke shop, Hermione and Max decided to walk to the sixth level, instead of taking a portal. The weather was a bit cloudy, but it was a relatively warm day.

Max was quietly walking beside her again, with the package tucked under his arm.



"So..." Hermione began. She hated to walk in silence, so she was feverishly searching for a topic. Then it came to her. "Tell me, how exactly do you do all that wand-less magic when you're fighting?"

He gave her a bewildered look. "What do you mean? I just do it. Are you asking how I learned it?"

"When...where...from whom!" Hermione continued. She hoped that he would indulge her, because she didn't really know anything about this. She had read some books about wizards who were able to do what Max did, but the information had been rather vague.

Max seemed to think it over. Then he exhaled. "Okay, my Master Lei...that's my great grandfather, taught me the art."

"Does it have a name?"

He shook his head. "No. It's just martial arts with the added dimension of magic."

"How come so little is known about it?" Hermione asked.

Max gave her a shy little smile. "Well, if you stop interrupting me, I'll tell you," he mumbled.

Hermione blushed. "Sorry. Carry on."

Max nodded. "The reason so little is known about it is because few wizards practise it. I guess it isn't really necessary for most wizards. I do it because it can come in very handy in a fight. I don't want to rely on my wand. The sad truth is that many wizards are vulnerable without their wands. When faced with a Muggle, they could probably Apparate to safety, since you don't need to be holding your wand for that. But I need to be able to win a fight without my wand."

"And why doesn't it have a name?"

Max smiled. "The practitioners of the art met about 200 years ago...to come up with a name. They couldn't agree on a name, and it nearly became a free for all brawl...or so Master Lei told me."

"So, how long does it take to master this art?"

"It depends. I started learning magic really early, so I had an advantage. You must have mastered many forms of wand-less magic before starting to incorporate magic in your fighting. Many people are a bit older, say in their thirties, before they start to learn the art. Most of them have day jobs, so their progress is slow."

Hermione took a moment to absorb the information. She was also getting a bit frustrated, because he was being very vague about all of it. Then she continued. "Right...but which aspects of magic, would you say, should someone know before starting to learn this art?"

"I'd say you'd have to be highly skilled in wand-less charms. Most of the techniques are wand-less charms. But I guess it doesn't hurt to be highly adept at transfiguration. Charms always came naturally to me, but I had to work very hard at my transfiguration in Salem, despite the fact that I had a head start on most other students. I guess you could say it's my weakness."

"Really? But Galatea told me you had three ordinary wizarding skill credits for transfiguration," Hermione said. These were the ordinary wizarding levels by the American name. She'd read about it in *An Appraisal of Magical Schools World-wide*. "You've reached the expert level in your fifth year, and you skipped a year too. I'd hardly call it a weakness."

Max blushed. "Well, you got three O.W.L's as well."

Hermione blushed in turn. She was rather proud of it. It was exceedingly rare that a student got three O.W.L's for any given subject. If this was accomplished, the N.E.W.T's would just be a formality regarding that particular subject, since it could be considered mastered by the individual in question.

Many students got no O.W.L.'s for their weak subjects, one for their average subjects, and two for the ones they were good at. The highest totals would usually be twelve or thirteen. This could be considered a very good result. Sometimes, once every ten years, there would be a particularly brilliant student who'd get fifteen or sixteen. But getting more O.W.L.'s than that was considered madness, even though it was theoretically possible to get thirty O.W.L.'s if you had ten subjects. In retrospect, Hermione still wasn't sure how she'd managed to get twenty-two.

"So I may assume that you got three credits for Charms too?"

Max nodded. "Without any problems. I could have taken my Charms O.W.L.'s before going to Salem."

"So what was your total score?" Hermione asked. Galatea hadn't told her that, and she really wanted to know.

"Sixteen. Three for Charms, Dark Arts Defence and Transfiguration, two for Astronomy, and one for my other subjects. Master Lei wasn't happy that I only got one O.W.L. for Herbology. He became a herbologist after he retired from the Order of Illumination," Max explained. "He said I should have gotten at least two."

"Oh," was all Hermione could say. Max's great-grandfather sounded like a very tough taskmaster. "What choice subjects did you take?" she then asked.

"What is this? Rita Skeeter's one hundred questions?" Max frowned.

Hermione looked down at the cobbled road, embarrassed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

Max shook his head and smiled bashfully once more. "Well, if you must know, I took Care of Magical Creatures, and Ancient Runes."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Ancient Runes?" Max never struck her as the bookish type. "Why Ancient Runes?"

Max shrugged. "I wanted to take Muggle Studies, but Master Lei wouldn't let me. He said I wouldn't learn anything. I reckon he was right."

"But you're a pure-blood, aren't you?"

"I am." Max nodded. "But Master Lei and I always lived among Muggles. Whether in Hong Kong, New York, Manaus, or Amsterdam."

"You lived in all those places?"

"Yeah. Master Lei owned an herb shop in Amsterdam. We lived there until I was six. Then we moved to Manaus where we'd go out into the jungle to find some herbs...we spent a year there. After Manaus we lived in Hong Kong for another three and a half years. Then we moved to New York. Master Lei is still living there."

"Let me guess, he's got an herb shop." Hermione ventured a guess.

Max nodded and smiled, and they continued to walk in silence for a while, giving Hermione time to contemplate all this information.

She was really pleased that he'd opened up to her a little. But something was still bothering her. Why had he reacted so strangely why when she'd been examining his hands? Did he fancy her? There was nothing else for it. She could torture herself over it, like she had with Ron in her sixth year. But she was older and more mature now. It would be much easier to just ask. The worst thing that could happen was total humiliation, but that was nothing compared to the torturous insecurity. "Max?"

"Yes?"

She tried very hard not to blush. "When I was patching you up? Why...err, why did you...well..."

"Why did I what?"

"Why did your heart beat faster when I touched your hand?" There, she'd said it!

"What?" he asked, looking completely bewildered. Then he caught on, and Hermione saw his deepest blush so far. "I...um, I don't know."

"D'you fancy me?"

He looked down at his shoes. "I dunno. Maybe?" he ventured, carefully glancing up from his shoes and looking at her.

Hermione couldn't help but to laugh at the answer. "Maybe? That's the best answer you could come up with?"

He shrugged helplessly. "You're a girl."

"Yes, thank you for noticing," she chuckled. Then she frowned. "So that's it. I'm a girl."

"Well...a woman, actually," he corrected.

"My, aren't you sharp!" Hermione laughed.

"You're smart...and...pretty...and your hands are really soft," he explained, "And you're really brave. I know all about how you helped Harry fight Voldemort." He paused before continuing. "But I don't think I fancy you! I can't really explain my reaction. I guess...I dunno. Maybe I thought I fancied you at the time. You're the only girl ever to hold my hand like that...except for Galatea."

To her relief, Hermione wasn't nearly as disappointed as she thought she'd be upon rejection. She'd just realised that despite the attraction she felt, she really didn't like Max like that. "You fancy Galatea...don't you?" she asked, with a knowing smirk on her face.

Max shook his head and Hermione's eyes widened. "You don't?"

"I love her," he said softly...more to himself than to her.

Hermione smirked again. "Then why don't you tell her?"

He suddenly looked panicked. "I can't! And I need to swear that you won't tell her either."

"Honestly..."

"Swear it!" His voice had suddenly turned into a menacing growl, and the mask was back in place. He had erected his barriers once more. But Hermione wouldn't be deterred this time...she wouldn't be fooled by the facade.

"But..."

He grabbed her by the arms and pushed her against the side of a building. "You can't tell her," he repeated.

"Max, you're hurting me!" she whimpered. His grip was so strong she felt he would crush her arms.

Startled, he relaxed his grip at once but repeated pleadingly. "Please, she can't know!"

"If you tell me why, I'll promise not to tell her."

Max thought it over and then nodded in agreement. He took a deep breath and started speaking. "Master Lei has many enemies. They are my enemies as well. Athanasios Anastasiou is one of them. He killed my mother and grandmother when I was two days old. Master Lei said Anastasiou would have killed me too if he hadn't reached me in time. I can't drag Galatea into my life...it would only endanger hers. I don't want anyone to know how I feel about her."

Hermione regarded him steadily. "I think that should be Galatea's decision. Harry did exactly the same thing, and he never got a chance to tell Ginny...and now look..."

Max suddenly moved very close to her, bent down and covered her mouth with his. Hermione stiffened at first, but his warm lips felt good...and cursing her weakness, she relaxed into the kiss. She didn't know how long it lasted, but she was definitely dazed when she

came out of it. Then her resolve returned, and the alley they were in resounded with the sound of the slap she gave him. "You bastard!"

Max cradled his cheek. "I didn't mean anything by it, but you were about to talk about You-Know-Who."

"What does Voldemort have to do with this?" Hermione asked, puzzled.

"Not him!" Max groaned. "Who were you talking about before I...err, interrupted you?"

Hermione's eyes widened. She'd been talking about Harry, and they weren't allowed to talk about him outside the Citadel lest someone mention his survival by mistake. She'd nearly said too much, and Max had stopped her. "But that still doesn't explain why you kissed me," she said accusingly.

Max blushed and nodded to a sign. Senu Alley, it read. And Hermione knew it to be the infamous snogging alley for Concordia's young citizens. "I think I saw someone following us. It could have been a spy. I thought this was a good way to send them a bogus signal...I'm sorry!" he said, rubbing his cheek.

"A spy? What kind of spy? Shouldn't the city's screening process keep people like that out?" Hermione whispered

"Anastasiou is extremely intelligent," Max whispered back. "I'm sure he has one or two spies in Concordia."

"Oh!" Hermione said. Then something occurred to her as she looked into Max's dark brown eyes. If it had indeed been a spy, he now believed she was Max's girlfriend. That would probably make her a target by association!

Max winced. "You're right. I've endangered you too now! See why I can't let anyone else get close?"

Hermione realised that he'd read her mind again. She shook her head. "Don't worry about me. I'm used to being a target by

association...Harry Potter's friend...remember? And you shouldn't shut anybody out because of this. Then she stirred, looked down and frowned. Max was still pressing close to her. "That had better be your wand!"

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Hermione was relieved when she found that Galatea was at the Citadel, when she and Max had arrived at the town house. Even though the kiss hadn't meant anything, she was feeling a bit guilty about it, and Galatea would have picked up those feelings of guilt immediately, leaving Hermione to come up with an explanation. She knew she'd have to tell her friend eventually, but at least she had a bit more time to ponder how exactly she'd tell Galatea.

The door recognised Hermione and swished open. Hermione stood aside to let Max go in first, letting the door know that he was welcome. "Go on ahead to the dining room Max," Hermione said, taking his cloak.

Max nodded, not looking her in the eyes, and walked into the parlour. Hermione sighed. He was still uneasy about that moment. She couldn't believe what he'd told her later...that it had been his first kiss. Apparently he was a natural then, because there hadn't been anything clumsy or awkward about it. Not that Hermione had had many examples for comparison. Ron had been the only man she'd ever kissed before! In fact, kissing Max couldn't be compared to kissing Ron at all, Hermione decided. Her first kiss had been magical, the culmination of nearly two years of dancing around one another and harbouring deep feelings for each other. She remembered, with a dull ache in her chest. This kiss had been just a kiss. A very exciting kiss that had made her knees buckle, true, but still.

She followed Max into the dining hall, finding him thoroughly embarrassed as his grandmother hugged him. "Oh, my baby! I'm so glad you're all right, sugar!"

"Grandma...you're embarrassing me!" he mumbled.



"You're never too old to give your granny a hug," Tempeste admonished. "Now sit down, and I'll go fix you some lunch."

Max nodded. "Thanks Gran."

Hermione looked at Commander Ironheart. "Commander, I've been meaning to ask you something earlier, but I didn't want to ruin such a touching moment," she said, referring to the reunion of grandfather and grandson.

"Ask away."

I was wondering. Do you read people's minds all the time, or can you shut your gift off at will?"

"I can shut it off at will." He smiled. "I'm not using the gift right now. It's quite a burden to read people's minds all the time. That's how a mind-reader learns to shut off his power in the first place...to prevent all the buzz from driving him insane."

"Isn't there a faster way to accomplish this?" Max frowned. "I don't want to intrude on people's privacy like this."

Ironheart smiled. "What do you mean?"

Max shook his head. "Not in front of Hermione."

So Ironheart concentrated briefly, and looked into his grandson's eyes. Then he started laughing out loud. "I'm sure Hermione already knew that."

"What?" Hermione asked. She hated to be left out of discussions, even though that had been a discussion she couldn't have participated in even if she'd wanted to, for lack of the mind-reading gift.

"That Matthias is seeing Janice!" the Commander chuckled.

"Oh, that!" Hermione giggled. Captain Faust and Lieutenant Cliff were in love, and though they tried to keep it a secret, nearly everybody in the Citadel knew about it. "Everybody knows that, Max."

Max grimaced. "I just came out of a coma...and while you know they're together you don't know what they were up to last night." He shuddered as he seemed to remember.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Do I want to know?"

"Not likely," Max grumbled.

It was too late. Her curiosity had been piqued. She was really developing a bad habit, but while she'd worked with the analysts, she'd developed a taste for ferreting out people's secrets. Hermione shuddered. She was turning into Rita Skeeter...she had to fight this with all her might.

"You really don't want to know!" Max said, and that gave Hermione the strength to overcome her curiosity.

Ironheart laughed and patted his grandson on the shoulder. "You know...I really didn't expect you to inherit the gift."

"Why is that, Commander?" Hermione asked.

"His father didn't inherit the gift." Ironheart explained. "Mind-reading is passed down a bloodline, like being a beast-master, empath or Parselmouth. All these gifts are passed down certain bloodlines, but they are known to skip generations."

"They can also be transferred magically," Hermione said, thinking about Harry's status as a Parselmouth.

"Yes, but those instances are exceedingly rare and often occur accidentally," Ironheart pointed out.

Hermione nodded, and Ironheart continued. "We don't really know why, but only one descendant of the gifted person in question inherits the gift." He looked at Max and smiled. "So now that Max has

manifested the power, I can stop watching my other grandchildren for signs. Still, I'm a bit surprised that the gift has manifested itself in you so late. It should have manifested itself during your childhood."

Max frowned. "Why didn't it?"

"I have no idea." Ironheart shrugged.

"Maybe he repressed it sub-consciously," Hermione offered. She didn't presume to know Max very well, but she thought she knew enough about him to make that assumption.

"Why do you keep talking about my repressing stuff," Max grumbled. "I don't repress."

"If you say so!" Hermione smirked.

"And don't patronise me."

"Who's patronising?" Hermione said, her smirk growing.

"Stop it," Ironheart interrupted, grinning from ear to ear. "You're behaving like a married couple!"

"We are not!" Hermione said shrilly, feeling her face grow warm. She glanced at Max and saw that he wasn't doing a good job hiding his blush either.

"My, I think I just struck a nerve here!" the old Ranger teased.

"That's not true...I like Hermione very much, but I..." Max began, but then he stubbornly closed his mouth.

"You like Hermione...how sweet!" Tempeste, who was levitating a huge tray full of pancakes behind her, said. Plates and cutlery also came zooming out of the kitchen, and the table magically set itself.

Max helped himself to a large stack of pancakes. "I don't like Hermione like that." He finished his sentence shyly and looked at Hermione, who suspected that Max was only this loose when he was

with his grandmother. "I don't really know you very well, but you've been helping me a lot, even though I've been a pri..." A warning look from his grandmother made him decide to change the word he'd been about to use into: "...prat...to you before. I'd like to be friends."

Hermione blushed a little. "That's okay." She was used to it. Ron's childish behaviour had really made her suffer at times. He'd always made up for it one way or another, but it had still been painful. "And we are friends."

"Well, I didn't want to presume anything."

"Honestly..." She shook her head and smiled. "I accept your friendship proposal, Maximilian Wolfe," she said pompously. "There was that formal enough for you?"

Max smiled his usual shy smile, and nodded. "I guess." Then without further delay, he started wolfing down his pancakes.

As he progressed, Hermione found herself surprised at the fact that someone could eat so much so quickly. He was positively stuffing himself, and she guessed that table manners were one thing he'd never learned about. She felt another ache in her heart as the image strangely reminded her of Ron.

An owl flying in through a window caught Hermione's attention. It landed in front of Max and stuck out its leg which had an envelope tied to it.

Max swallowed down his food and wiped his mouth before reaching for the owl and untying the letter. The owl took off immediately after being relieved of its burden, and Max read some strange glyphs on the envelope. "It's from great-aunt Mei," he said, before opening the letter. He then carefully read the letter and put it down with a shaking hand. "Master Lei...he's dying. He wants to see me."

"Dying?" Ironheart frowned. "He's only one hundred and six."

Max drew a shuddering breath. "When we went into the Amazon, we got into a bit of a scrap with a Vipertooth that was obviously a little

way out of its primary habitat. In fact, Master Lei heard stories from the natives about a large flying serpent, so he decided to take it out. He succeeded, but not before the Vipertooth's fangs grazed his shoulder and left a bit of poison in the wound. His survival was miraculous, but he never completely recovered his health."

"Why was I never told about this?" Ironheart frowned.

"He didn't want anybody to know. He thought I'd be taken away from him if his failing health became known...Commander, I have to go to him!"

Ironheart frowned. "That may be a problem. No one may go on leave right now. Not even for a deathbed visit. I wouldn't want to show favouritism."

"Please!" Max said, his voice cracking, and for the first time Hermione saw his eyes misting up.

"Commander...isn't there any kind of danger in that area...anything with which you can justify Max's departure?" Hermione asked.

"Well, the Jersey Devil has been stirring up some trouble lately, but it isn't anything the local Ministry wizards can't handle," Ironheart said thoughtfully. He started pacing about. Then he smashed his fist onto the tabletop. "That's it!"

"What's it?" Hermione asked eagerly.

"Well, you haven't registered that improved cerebral revival potion yet, have you?"

"I thought I'd test it a bit more first. Galatea did the necessary tests before giving it to Max, but I'm still not completely comfortable with it."

"You could test it properly in Salem's Magical Medicine Institute, and insist that you want to supervise the procedure. I could send you and Galatea...and Max as evidence of the potion's potency...and your bodyguard."

"Will that stand up to the Order's scrutiny?" Hermione asked, feeling doubtful. After all, she was a Ranger. Shouldn't she be able to beat a host of foes? "It isn't really that dangerous."

"Well..." Ironheart said cautiously. "Until that thing that did a number on Petra is found...I don't want two of my brightest Medical Rangers to go out unescorted, especially because there are so few of you already. I'm sure Nehanda will support me on this. Lei used to be her mentor as well."

Hermione had to smile at Ironheart's deviousness. That could actually work...it was believable! "When do we leave?"

"How fast can you pack?" the old Ranger asked.

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It was amusing to see how Max held Galatea's hand like she were a little girl, as he guided her through the crowds of the densely populated city. The only times the witch had been in an area that was even remotely similar to New York City, had been when she'd visited Paris with her family. New Caledonia was quite sparsely populated, and the Southern Cross School of Sorcery and Spell-casting, the school she had attended, was also in the middle of nowhere on an unplotable island in the South Pacific. Southern Cross was the alternative to Bunyips Wizarding Institute in the Australian outback, Antipodean Academy for Witchcraft and Wizardry in New Zealand and schools on the Asian mainland...like Bap Lung, which meant Eight Dragons. Hermione had read about it in An Appraisal of Magical Schools World-wide. Many Polynesian and Melanesian students attended Southern Cross, and even Chinese and Australians chose to attend Southern Cross instead of their own schools sometimes.

Max walked to the storefront of an old herb shop and pushed the door open. The scent of incense washed over them, reminding Hermione of her brief time in Divination. An elderly man came up to them. Hermione guessed him to be in his early eighties.

"Uncle Long." Max nodded.

"Maximilian," the man said, returning a similar nod. Hermione noticed he had the same stiff pose that Max so often adopted. "Father is expecting you," he continued, in remarkably good English. "May I have the names of your companions?"

Max looked at Hermione. "Hermione Granger from England."

The old man gave her a curt nod. "May I assume that you attended Hogwarts?"

"Your assumption is correct, sir."

"I attended Hogwarts too." The old man nodded. "Hufflepuff House, like my mother."

Something clicked in Hermione's mind as she remembered. This man was Rose McKinnon's son. He was related to Mrs Weasley. "I was in Gryffindor."

"Good house to be in...Gryffindor...but Hogwarts is a good school. My father was in Slytherin," Long said evenly.

Hermione couldn't cover her surprise as she looked at Max. "Your great-grandfather went to Hogwarts? You never told me that."

"You never asked." Max answered evasively and nodded towards Galatea. "This is Galatea Angelou, from New Caledonia."

"Nice to meet you," Galatea said nervously, prompting Hermione to smile. To Galatea, this probably felt like being introduced to the family.

"Angelou...now why does that name sound so familiar? From New Caledonia, hmm? Ah yes, your father is a Herbologist, isn't he? Armand Angelou?"

"Yes sir," Galatea said, her face lighting up.

"Good man...Armand," Long said evenly, not betraying any emotion. Then he gestured towards something that looked like a storage closet. "Well Maximilian. Don't keep him waiting!"

Max walked over to the closet and opened the door. Hermione saw it was a secret passageway with stairs leading down.

He lead them through a corridor lined with doors and finally came to a halt outside a door at the end of the hall. He took a deep breath and raised his hand to knock on the door.

"Stop wasting time and come in, Maximilian," a raspy old voice said.

Max's face contorted into a grim smile. "He sounds just fine to me," he mumbled and pushed the door open. On the other side, they encountered a stooping little Chinese man with rather large ears, a long moustache drooping down his face, and a few wispy white hairs on his head. He was leaning heavily on a cane, but his eyes were shining with determination.

"You don't look very good," Max observed.

"You won't look this good when you reach my age," the ancient man challenged. Then he exhaled, and the shine left his eyes. "I've been living on willpower, Maximilian," he continued as he hobbled to his bed, where an elderly lady was waiting for him patiently. "I've become sick...old and weak!"

Max took the cane as the old man reclined on the bed. "Master Lei...Aunt Mei these are my friends, Hermione Granger and Galatea Angelou."

The old man coughed uncontrollably, and the woman Hermione assumed was his daughter had tears welling in her eyes.

"Hermione Granger," Lei said, after he'd stopped coughing. "I read about your achievement. Impressive!" He looked at Max. "This idiot could have gotten at least twenty O.W.S.C.'s, but he wasted too much time in getting that third credit for Transfiguration"

"I don't need this!" Max grumbled as he turned around and prepared to leave.



"No, Max...please...don't leave!" Lei said feebly. "I'm sorry!"

Max's eyes widened in surprise. Hermione guessed that Lei Li had never apologised before, and he'd said Max instead of Maximilian.

"Please..." He gestured to the chair next to his bed, and Max sat down reluctantly.

Lei took a deep rattling breath, and tears leaked out of the corners of his eyes as they lost focus. "Won't be long now...I'm sorry for all the things I put you through, in your childhood. But I had to prepare you, you see." His thin old hand grabbed Max's. "I failed...I'm so sorry."

"You didn't fail...Master Lei." Max said, his voice strangely strangled. "You did a good job. I'm very good at what I do, and have some good friends!" He looked back at Hermione and Galatea and smiled.

"I guess you turned out all right, despite the things I did to you," Lei said, his breathing becoming more laboured. "But there is something you don't know...something only I know. I've kept it to myself...all these years. A heavy burden...so heavy!" he said tiredly.

"What are you talking about...Master Lei?" Max asked apprehensively.

"When Anastasiou and his foul creatures killed my dear Lin...and you mother, on Christmas Eve in 1976, I was too late! I wrote everything down in a journal, for you to know...you need to know." He patted a small green book on the bed. Then Lei took another laboured breath before continuing. "Read it..."

"I will." Max said solemnly.

The corners of the old man's mouth turned upwards as his eyes came to rest on Galatea. He pulled Max closer and whispered something in his ear.

"What?" Max frowned.

"Never mind." Lei heaved an exasperated sigh. Then he looked at Max. "Son...I've done some things I am not proud of. I've been touched by darkness too many times."

"It never consumed you...Master Lei. You don't have anything to be ashamed of."

Lei shook his head. "I made some horrible mistakes, Max, it's all here," he said, patting the green diary again. "Forgive me!"

"I'm sure it can't be that bad, but if it is forgiveness you need, I can forgive you," Max said quietly.

"Thank you!" Lei said. Then he looked at Galatea again. "Come here, young lady."

Galatea took a tentative step forward.

"Yes, come over here...stand beside Max...don't be afraid."

Galatea went and stood beside Max.

"Now give me your hand," he said, and he took Galatea's pale hand in his. Then he brought his other hand over and put Max's hand in Galatea's. "Take care of him! He thinks he doesn't need anybody...I taught him that. I was wrong...I never gave him the love he deserved...he needs it...love. Please...love him!" Then Lei released his last breath, and his hands fell back limply onto his chest.

"Master Lei?" Max mumbled, looking on in disbelief. His lips started quivering and a few sobs managed to escape him, accompanied by a few tears. Galatea sat down in his lap and put her arms around him, stroking his hair softly his tears wet the collar of her shirt.

Aunt Mei's reached over and closed Lei's eyes. "He waited for you to get here...so he could die in peace," she said, speaking for the first time since they'd entered the room. Then she picked up the green diary and gave it to Max. "I don't know what's in it. He'd been writing quit a lot in it the last few days. I think he had a lot on his conscience. I suggest you read it as soon as possible."

Max nodded and asked, "What will we do now, Aunt Mei?"

"Now we mourn," the woman said. "You are his sole heir. Long and I thought that you had the best claim, since he raised you like a son, so we gave up our shares. We didn't need it." She gave Max a sad smile. "He really did love you, you know."

Max nodded and looked at Hermione. "I guess we'd better go to Salem."

"No." Hermione shook her head. "You and Galatea can stay here. I'll go to Salem by myself," she said, wanting to give Max the chance to mourn his great-grandfather properly...something he needed to do, for his own sake. It seemed that the old man had given him a nudge in the right direction, as far as his situation with Galatea was concerned. Maybe he'd listen to his mentor, where he'd ignored Hermione's advice.

"But..."

"Don't argue with me, Max. I'll be fine. I'll just Port Key to Salem and come back after I'm finished."

"You can stay here after you come back," Mei offered. "All my grandchildren are grown up. It'll be good to have some people in the house once more."

"That's very kind of you," Hermione said. Then she took out her Port Key, tapped her wand to it and told it where she wanted to go and half a heartbeat later she felt that sensation in her navel, and she was off to S.M.M.I.

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## Signs and Portents

### Chapter 13

Anastasious's fangs glinted in the dim light provided by the torches in his underground lair. She was gaining in strength! He remembered helping Her to break out of the crystal using the power of the black moon of July 31st 2000, a highly exceptional phenomenon. He succeeded in freeing her from crystal Merlin had trapped her in, a long time ago. She'd been all weak and feeble then, but now...just being in her presence was intoxicating. The scent of her magical blood, flowing through her veins...it was enough to make him tremble. And her beauty, oh her terrible beauty surpassed that of the most beautiful Veela.

Someone chuckled. "I guess it is true what they say. Once love touches a person, he becomes a poet."

He turned around and saw a short, scrawny man with a pasty face grinning at him, while toying with a gold pendant shaped like a curving teardrop. What he was seeing wasn't her true appearance, but her choice of words and her nervous habit of playing with the pendant gave her away.

"What do you want, Selene?" he asked, annoyed that she'd read his mind.

Selene's true appearance was that of a tallish and attractive young woman with dark hair, and equally dark eyes that seemed to pierce one's soul. However, she could go to great lengths to make herself look plain and common, and she was good at all sorts of illusionary spells that hid her true appearance. Often, she went disguised as a man, using Polyjuice Potion.

She was an excellent spy and very valuable to him. And since he had a large role in her upbringing and almost considered her a daughter, he took her insolent behaviour with a grain of salt.

"Just came to see how you were doing, you old bloodsucker!" she taunted merrily. "How is the mistress?"

Anastasiou regarded her steadily. She was tired, he could tell. He had worked her really hard, and he knew she needed rest, like other mortals, but he needed her for several more jobs.

"Oh, won't you let me get some sleep?" she asked, looking at him pleadingly.

"I suggest you let people speak their minds, even though you know what they are about to say." Anastasiou sighed. "I thought you'd have learned to control your gift by now. You are developing a bad habit. I know you like to show off, but other people will feel uneasy if you remind them that you read their minds all the time, and that isn't going to help you in the long run."

"I know that, boss...and I can control my power easily enough, but I like to read minds. You'd be surprised how many skeletons some people have in their closets." She fished a Muggle candy bar out of her pocket and ate it. "Anywaf's," she mumbled, before swallowing. "I've been watching Malfoy. He would make a valuable ally."

Anastasiou nodded. "What about Petra? Did you find out who was behind that?"

He paced and enjoyed the fact that it made her nervous. He could smell the shift in her scent. He didn't smell fear, but there was a definite anxiety there. "If my knowledge of magical gifts is as deep as I think it is, mind-readers are able to pull images out of people's minds. Did you try this?"

Her scent changed, and now he smelled her fear. He luxuriated in it, for he felt she'd been losing respect for him. "Sorry Lord Anastasiou, it didn't occur to me."

He sighed exasperatedly. "I forgive you..." He nodded to the big doors that lead to the main chamber. "...but She may not. I suggest you go and remedy your mistake by finding out who this wizard is. He would make a powerful ally."

Selene looked at him quizzically. "Okay, but I doubt it. He killed one of our potential allies. We suspect he was the intended target, and that the rest was collateral damage."

"Ah, yes, Saleh! Such a shame that was. He was an excellent administrator and record keeper. He provided me with most of Voldemort's transformation spells." Anastasiou frowned and sank back into thought. He still wondered who had killed Saleh, and why. As far as he knew, very few people had known that Saleh had still been alive. Some of his allies, the Order of Illumination...

He tapped his left fang with his index finger. His allies wouldn't have killed him...simply because he was too valuable to them alive, and as far as he knew none of them had perceived Saleh as a threat.

The Order of Illumination could have killed him, but it wouldn't have gone over the dead bodies of innocents to accomplish it...unless one of the Rangers had gone dark. He knew they weren't perfect. They tried to prevent people like him from ever entering, but once every three decades, on average, a sensible wizard inclined towards realism, rather than the regular do-good fanatic, managed to slip through. They were usually exposed and ejected quickly enough, but Anastasiou knew it was an issue that haunted the Order immensely.

He supposed, for the sake of argument, that a Ranger had gone dark. It had to be one of the more powerful ones. He'd have to ask his spy in Concordia to send him a list of these Rangers, and their backgrounds. It was probably a dead end, but there was still a small chance that it could lead to something. After all, he was the top analyst in his day, and he'd only got better over time.

He paced around in deep thought. Maybe he had to look at it from a different angle. Saleh used to be a Death Eater, although very few beings knew this. Apart from the Order of Illumination, and Saleh's former allies, who knew this little titbit of information? Albus Dumbledore...but he was dead. Severus Snape used to be a Death Eater as well, and it was through him that Dumbledore had found out about it...but it couldn't have been Snape. He was competent and his magical ability was above average, but he couldn't have done what that wizard had.

Then there was Harry Potter. Saleh had once told Anastasiou that the boy had found out about his being a Death Eater. He was powerful enough to cause that amount of devastation, detested Death Eaters and had shown a tendency to do whatever it took to hunt them down and get information out of them...as Lucius Malfoy had found out! But he was dead... or was he? They'd never produced a body. Information from his spy as to why no body had been produced had been sketchy, but there was talk about some kind of magical interference.

He couldn't believe he was actually pondering the possibility of Harry Potter being alive...much less having turned to glorious darkness, but in this scenario all the pieces of the puzzle fit perfectly. He had the motive...the power...and possibly the inclination. He clearly came out at the top of the list after analysis.

Turning around as he heard footsteps behind him with the help of his superhuman hearing, he was confronted with one of the dark trolls that served as the Mistress' personal guard. At first, he'd been amazed at how these large creatures moved so quietly. Humans would not be able to hear them move...yes the perfect killers!

"She wishes to see you, vampire!" the troll barked and stalked off in front of him to open the door.

Anastasiou turned around and raised his voice a little. "You can go now, Selene. Please gather the information I requested."

"As you wish, Lord Anastasiou," she replied, and hurried off. Like most mortals, she was afraid of the trolls and wanted to be as far away from them as possible at all times.

He entered the chamber that used to be his, and was graced by Her smile as She looked at him. The torch-lit chamber was cavernous, but it seemed smaller now that it was occupied by Her greatness. He couldn't hold her gaze for very long, and he soon lowered his eyes to the floor. He knew he would have surely blushed...had he been able to do so.

"Well, my favourite servant...how are things progressing?"

He smiled at Her words and chanced a glance at Her. "I am rounding up trade currency for the Dementors. They drove a hard bargain, my lady. They wanted ten happy beings for every individual we wanted.

"Who have you got?"

"Lucius Malfoy, Horatiu Chivu, Ivan Maximov and Tetsuo Yamato. The others were too far gone to be of any use to us. These four are now being held in a lower security area in Azkaban where they face less exposure to the Dementors."

"Just four?" Her eyes narrowed a bit.

"I beg your forgiveness, my lady. It was the best I could do. Lest we forget, they have to be replaced by forty people! Acquiring all of these people will be very difficult to do without rousing the suspicion of our enemies." He frowned.

He had to kidnap forty people and deliver them to the Dementors without anyone noticing. That was probably the most difficult task he'd ever had to undertake. "So far, I have thirty-one people. We're lucky that the Order of Illuminations seems to be preoccupied with something else right now."

"Yes..." She purred. "I can feel his presence...his power. I want him to join me."

"My lady? Though I suspect who it could be, we don't know for sure who it is, and I doubt that his motivations coincide with yours. I believe he only wants revenge...against people like us."

"Who do you believe it is, then?" Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Harry Potter, my lady."

"The one who bested this Voldemort...you told me he was dead."



"I can't explain his possible return, my lady. Allow me to explain what made me come to this conclusion."

She nodded slowly, and Anastasiou explained his theory about why he thought it could be Harry Potter to Her.

"You are correct..." She said, after listening to his story. "But if we can give him a larger scope for his revenge, he will join us. After all, from what you told me, the Dementors joined Voldemort for very similar reasons, did they not?"

Anastasiou nodded. She did have a point there. "Some of your servants are already working to find out who he is for certain, my lady."

"Your initiative is noted, my dear Athanasios." She smiled sweetly. "How are the other recruitment efforts going?"

"As planned, my lady."

His plan was to gather an inner circle of about twenty beings that knew everything about his plans. The rest would be accomplished through cells of other groups who would never find out about Her existence. He would simply keep them happy and dependent by satisfying their petty needs.

Ironically, forming the inner circle was much tougher, for it was difficult to find capable and dependable allies like that. Allies that could be depended on if properly motivated. Trust was not a word that would be used, even in that inner circle.

He continued, "A young wizard by the name of Draco Malfoy has means to baffle all sorts of magical detectors. He is one of my top candidates, and he will marry into a prominent British wizarding family soon...the Weasleys. I believe I could make him my second spy in Concordia, since his future brother-in-law has a business there. If George Weasley can be convinced to offer him a job there..."

She nodded and carelessly waved off further speech. "Carry on with your excellent work. And keep me informed of this powerful wizard.

The sooner we find him, the better our chances of convincing him to join us," She added lazily, as She slowly walked to a large four-poster that had been brought into the room.

Anastasiou left the chamber and hurried to his new and smaller chambers. His meal was fearfully awaiting him, and after that he would have to do a lot of planning, for the extraction of four people from Azkaban could not be done easily...much less the introduction of forty new ones. He would have to contact several cells all over the world to spring into action simultaneously and cause a lot of chaos, drawing attention and resources away from Azkaban.

As he swept into his room, he addressed one of his few truly trusted servants, a being who had once been a Prussian nobleman called Wilhelm von Brandenburg. Now, he was a two hundred and thirty-eight year-old vampire. "Wilhelm, please instruct the ninth, thirteenth, twenty-fourth and thirty-ninth cells to undertake action at midnight, Greenwich Time."

"The Azkaban operation will happen then?"

"Unless you have another suggestion!"

"Not about the time of extraction, but I believe it would be better to use the twenty-ninth instead of the twenty-fourth cell."

Anastasiou thought about it. The twenty-fourth cell consisted mostly of lesser vampires and their ghouls, in northern Australia... He smiled. "It'll be broad daylight...they won't be effective." He nodded. "Good observation...I forgot about that. Do as you wish!"

The younger vampire bowed slightly and left the room, leaving Anastasiou with a frightened teenaged girl.

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It was a special evening in the wizarding world in Britain. It was a Memorial Day to remember the slain in the war that had ended nearly three years ago. As a result, the shops wouldn't close until midnight. It was a relatively warm night for early April, and Ginny cast annoyed

glances at Ron as she strolled down Diagon Alley, arm in arm with Draco. He was hovering behind her and Draco like a shadow all the time. It was probably her mother's doing! She must have put him up to it.

She sighed. She'd moved in with Draco two days ago, in an effort to compromise, and it couldn't hurt to live with a person you were about to marry anyway. In retrospect, it hadn't been a good idea to move in with him on April Fool's Day. It had taken her a very long time to convince her mother that it was for real. Ginny shuddered. She almost wished she hadn't convinced her mother.

She and Draco now slept in the same bed, and Draco had been remarkably cool about the whole thing. So far, he hadn't tried to pressure her into anything.

Ginny sighed. She hoped that her mother would come around before the wedding, which was to take place in June. She would hate to miss her mother at her own wedding.

Her insides squirmed guiltily. She really hadn't intended to string Draco along like this, but the simple fact of the matter was that she wasn't ready for him yet, and she felt worse when she realised that she might not be ready on their wedding night either. She kicked a small pebble and sent it flying into the shins of Rita Skeeter, who was following Amos Diggory around and pestering him with all sorts of questions. Rita yelped and Ginny quickly looked the other way.

"Do you want ice cream, my love?" Draco asked.

Ginny ignored Ron's groan and smiled at him. "I'd love some!"

"Do you want some, Weasley?"

"Sod off Malfoy," Ron growled

Draco went into Florean Fortescue's to get Ginny her ice cream, and Ron turned to look at Ginny with narrowed eyes. Ginny didn't like that look. It meant that Ron was jumping to all sorts of wrong conclusions about everything.

"Malfoy told me he intends to respect your wishes, to..." He swallowed and blushed. "Err, retain your virtue...but I never knew it was such a big issue for you."

It wasn't what Ginny had expected, and it was her turn to blush. "Actually, it isn't, but I needed him to back off for a while."

"You did? Why?"

Ginny nibbled on her lower lip and tried to look very interested in the cobbled stones that made up Diagon Alley. The pathetic truth was that she was still deeply in love with a dead man...Harry Potter, and to her it felt like betraying him. "I'm just not ready, all right! Just leave it alone."

"If you're not ready then maybe you should call off the wedding," Ron said, looking at her hopefully. "You can't just string Malfoy along like that. Think of his feelings!"

"Nice try, Ron, but we both know you couldn't care less about Draco's feelings! Cancel the wedding...You'd just love that, wouldn't you?" she said sarcastically.

"Yeah," Ron gave her a brief toothy grin "...but my point stands!" he pressed.

Ginny knew her brother was right, of course, but if she called off the wedding now it would cause too much trouble. She didn't want to do that to Draco, because despite his occasional selfish moods, he was really good to her. "I just can't do that, Ron," she said stubbornly.

"I'm not asking you to. You're a big girl and capable of making your own decisions. Even if they are wrong!"

"Let's not talk about wrong decisions," Ginny warned. "What has kept you from swallowing your pride and going back to Hermione?"

"Because I'm right and she's wrong!" he grumbled.

"Oh come off it, Ron!" Ginny said, raising her voice. "Harry did not turn evil!"

"Yes he did. I know some things, Ginny!" Ron said darkly.

"Yeah, like what?" Ginny asked, eyeing him sceptically.

He winced. "I can't tell you."

Ginny smirked in triumph. "Because there's nothing to tell, is there?"

Ron exhaled and suddenly looked deflated. "Never mind. How is Hermione doing, anyway? She owls you frequently, doesn't she?"

"Great," Ginny said, and she told Ron about their distant Ranger cousin, Max Wolfe, that he was in coma and how Hermione was trying to get him out of it.

"That's Hermione for you," Ron said gloomily. "And has she met anyone yet?"

"If she did, she didn't tell me about it," Ginny said. She felt bad for Ron despite the fact that he was a huge prat. He still loved Hermione. How could he not? She was one in a million.

A sandy haired wizard came up to them, and she recognised Seamus Finnigan, who was living with Lavender Brown. Molly had heavily criticised their unmarried status, but Ginny didn't mind. In this day and age there was no better way to really get to know someone than to live with him or her. That's why she was staying with Draco...it was the final test. If he managed to respect her, all her worries about the old Draco resurfacing would be put to rest.

"Hullo there Weasleys," Seamus greeted. He slapped Ron on the back and then kissed Ginny's hand. "Looking more beautiful every day, Ginny."

"Do you want to get to know her better? She's single," Ron said.

Seamus laughed. "I don't think Lavender would appreciate that. And what about Malfoy?"

"We can Port Key him into a room full of Mackled Malaclaws," Ron suggested. "Then it would only be a matter of time before an unfortunate accident finished him off."

"How are you, Seamus?" Ginny interrupted. "How do you like working for Percy?" she asked, remembering that Seamus was now working in that department.

"Busy, and working for Percy isn't that bad." He sighed. "The ban on flying carpets will be lifted effective January 1st 2002. At least that whole affair is behind us. And the boss is taking as much time off as he can get to be with Hannah."

"Percy, taking time off?" Ron asked, amazed.

Seamus nodded. "Told me he doesn't want to make the same mistake Crouch made. I don't begrudge him his time with his wife, but I could really use his help right now, though."

"Because of what happened in Petra," Ron pointed out.

"There's that too, yes." The Irish wizard nodded, massaging the muscles at the back of his neck. "There is something out there, Ron. I understand the Order of Illumination is hunting it, but there is no indication that they're having any luck finding it. People are worried. Some reckon that it's You-Know-Who."

"It can't be Voldemort," Ginny interjected, causing Seamus to flinch. "I'm sure Harry killed him."

"Me too," Ron said, much to her surprise.

Seamus shrugged. "Well, better the devil you know..."

He paused as Draco pushed his way past him to get to Ginny. "Finnigan!" he said, with barely restrained loathing, and Ginny frowned at his tone.

"Malfoy," Seamus replied coolly.

Ginny felt miserable. None of her Gryffindor friends got along with her fiancé. She'd lost count of the times they'd tried to persuade her not to marry him and the times she'd assured them that he was a changed man...mostly. She had to stand her ground...she needed to forget Harry and move on with her life.

"I have to go!" Seamus said suddenly. "Lavender and I will come to your wedding, of course." He smiled warmly at Ginny and didn't even look at Draco. "But you really don't have to rush into things, you know. Why don't you just live together for a while? Trust me, it can work wonders for a relationship."

"I'm sure it can," Ginny sighed. Seamus was a bit subtler than Ron, but not much. Why was everybody telling her it was a bad idea? "Thanks but my mind is made up."

"It's your wedding." Seamus shrugged and turned away, just as the clocks in a nearby shop chimed, signalling the arrival of midnight.

A thundering explosion that shook the narrow street and shattered a lot of windows, following the last stroke of the clocks.

The sheer force of the explosion threw Ginny to the ground and her brother helped her up as Seamus drew his wand and looked around, trying to get an idea of what was going on.

"Ginny, are you okay?" Ron asked worriedly.

Ginny nodded. "Where..."

She heard Seamus grunt and collapse onto the street. A small throwing dagger was sticking out of his back.

"No!" said Ron, dismayed.

Ginny surveyed the area. She needed a safe place to work on Seamus.

"Ginny, we have to get out of here!" Ron urged, holding Seamus under the armpits.

Then Ginny noticed a stall in front of the apothecary. "Come on, hide behind that stall. I have to help Seamus."

"But..."

"He's bleeding, Ron! Trust me, I had disaster class last week, it's all still fresh in my mind."

"You had disaster class last week..." Ron muttered. "He needs proper attention, Ginny. You're a half trained nurse."

"I'm his best chance..." she said, before gasping in horror. A hooded man loomed over Ron, with a long dagger in its pale hand. "Ron!"

Ron started turning around, but Ginny knew it would be too late. She would never be able to draw her wand and take aim in time. But just before the hooded man could plunge down the blade, a pair of voices bellowed, "Lumos Solem!"

The man...a vampire...Ginny suddenly realised, dropped the blade. It clattered onto the ground next to Ron, who had drawn his own wand and had immediately jammed it against the chest of the now smoking vampire. He muttered a spell and the vampire started making choking noises. As Ron backed off, Ginny saw a stake sticking out of its heart. The vampire fell down and started decomposing at a rapid rate.

Ginny looked over her shoulder and saw the Longbottoms, Neville and Eloise, standing in the doorway of the apothecary with their wands aimed out to the street.

"Bring Seamus in here!" Eloise commanded as Neville got out of the doorway to make room.

Ginny flicked her wand and levitated him into the apothecary. Following directions, Ginny put him on a long table, face down. Quickly, she cast a charm around the knife to see whether or not it



was poisoned. Her suspicions were confirmed as the knife glowed with a sickly yellow.

Then she cast a charm to slow down his heart-rate, to slow down the bleeding and the spreading of the poison through his system. Next, she cast a detoxification charm to purge Seamus of the poison, and then she started to work on the wound itself, frowning in concentration as she healed the punctured lung first, and then moving outwards.

After a couple of minutes of intense concentration, minutes that had seemed like hours to her, she lowered her wand with a shaking hand.

"Everything seems to have quieted down," Ron called, peeking through the windows.

Ginny looked out of the window too and saw a couple of Aurors, and many Ministry wizards swarming the place.

"Good job, Ginny," Eloise praised.

"Yeah, you were brilliant." Ron nodded, with a smirk of approval on his face

Ginny wiped a sweaty lock out of her eyes and smiled. "I didn't know I had it in me! That was an some pretty advanced stuff..." Her face fell and the bottom dropped out of her stomach as she remembered. "Where is Draco?"

"Don't worry about that git," Neville said darkly. "He certainly didn't worry about you. I was just coming outside say hello to you all when this started. He Disapparated in a flash. What kind of a man would leave his wife-to-be like that?"

"Yeah!" Ron nodded vehemently. "If you won't listen to me, at least listen to Neville. Malfoy may be honey-tongued, but when the going got tough he left you out on a limb. That is the kind of man he is! Harry would never have abandoned you like..." Ron's jaw clicked shut, and he didn't finish his sentence as he realised what he'd just said. Ginny's heart surged with joy and Neville's eyes brightened.

"Caught on, have you...took you long enough!" he grinned.

Ron looked at Neville in horror as if he were an Acromantula, and stormed out of the shop.

"What did I say?" Neville asked quizzically.

Ginny shrugged. She didn't know, and she didn't really care because she was too happy! Ron must have realised that deep down, he knew he was wrong about Harry. That had to be it, and knowing Ron it was impossible to tell how long it would take him to come to that conclusion for himself." She had to write to Hermione about this!

"I wonder what caused this?" Neville frowned. A random act of violence by dark creatures?" He shook his head. "I wasn't any great shakes at Defence Against the Dark Arts, but this just doesn't make sense."

"What were you two doing here anyway?"

"I was filling in for my grandfather, and Neville was keeping me company. Gramps is getting a bit old to stay up this late."

Neville shook his head. "No he isn't. I saw him having drinks with his mates at the Leaky Cauldron on my way here."

Ginny chuckled. As Neville's best man, Seamus had told the embarrassing story of how Eloise and Neville had fallen in love. It had all started when Neville botched an order of herbs and came to Midgen's Cures for all Maladies to apologise. Old man Midgen hexed off Neville's ears, but Eloise had been smitten. Ginny suspected there was no love lost between Neville and Old Midgen, and Neville had just confirmed her suspicion by ratting on the old man.

Seamus groaned and opened his eyes. He heaved and coughed up a little blood.

Ginny blushed in shame. "Oh, sorry! I forgot to double-check whether or not you still had some blood in your lungs...hold on."

She performed a spell that removed the last bit of blood, and his breathing eased. "It's okay." He sighed. "Thank you. I thought that was going to be it." He smiled at Neville and Eloise. "Hello there! Hey Elli, I know it is technically past closing time, but can I still buy a flask of birth-control potion?"

"Hold on, I'll get it," Eloise said as she went deeper into the shop to get what Seamus asked for.

"Birth control?" Neville asked. "Doesn't Lavender want any kids?"

"Not yet." Seamus shrugged. "That's okay, because I'm not really in a hurry to have kids either. Lavender keeps talking about the stars not being right to start having kids...or something like that." Seamus sighed. "It's like living with Trelawney."

Ginny and Neville laughed at this.

"Where is Ron?" Seamus asked.

"Dusting the cobwebs off his brain." Ginny smiled.

Neville chuckled briefly, before his face turned serious again. "You could use some dusting too, Ginny. Malfoy..."

"Isn't Harry...I know," Ginny groaned. She was disappointed in Draco for leaving her, but she felt it would be childish to break off the marriage for something so trivial.

"I was going to say he didn't deserve you," the round-faced wizard frowned. "But yes, her certainly isn't Harry."

"Listen, he isn't all bad!"

Neville and Seamus exchanged glances but said nothing else.

Ginny sighed. "Harry's dead. I have to get on with my life."

"By running away from the past?" Eloise asked. Ginny saw her leaning against the counter. "You can marry Draco if he makes you happy. But marrying him won't make you forget about Harry."

Ginny bit her lip. She really didn't need this. "Thanks for taking me in for a while," Ginny said quickly. "See you at the wedding!" She walked out of the shop and Disapparated.

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Ron shivered as he remembered Neville's words. He was going bonkers. He could have sworn it had been Harry talking to him. He'd said the same thing after the first task in the Triwizard Tournament.

He sighed. The old Harry would probably have died defending Ginny, rather than run like Malfoy. But Harry had turned evil! Ron had started to doubt his convictions at times, until Malfoy told him that Harry had threatened to kill him. His Sneakoscope hadn't reacted, so Malfoy must have been telling the truth.

Then again, when Malfoy said yes after Ron asked him whether he would protect Ginny with his own life, the Sneakoscope hadn't buzzed either. At the time, maybe Malfoy had believed he would protect Ginny, and chickened out when things went bad for real. Then again, Malfoy was a Slytherin, so perhaps he would adopt a different, more subtle means to protect Ginny in the future. He'd have to confront Malfoy on abandoning Ginny like that. Still, something didn't feel right to Ron.

He arrived at the building that housed the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and saw many of his Ministry colleagues from various departments standing there. He saw that the front doors of the building had been torn away, and a feeling of nausea overcame him. Breaching that building was nearly impossible.

"Ron!" Percy and Charlie said in unison, and he rushed over to them.

"What happened here?"

"Someone broke into the Department building," Percy said.

"Why would they do that?" Ron asked.

Before Percy could answer, a grave looking Amos Diggory addressed him. "A word."

Percy nodded and followed the Minister for Magic into the building. Ron sank back into deep thought and his frown attracted Charlie's attention.

"What's up little brother?"

"Huh?"

"Something is bothering you."

Ron nodded slowly, and told Charlie how Malfoy immediately Disapparated when the fighting started, never bothering to try and protect Ginny. He also proudly recounted how Ginny had saved Seamus Finnigan, and Charlie beamed.

"Atta girl, Ginny!" He nodded, mimicking Ron's proud look. "We have to do something about Malfoy, though."

Ron shook his head. "We can't meddle in Ginny's life like that."

Charlie raised his eyebrows in surprise and a small smile appeared on his face. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Not really," Ron answered truthfully, for he was definitely feeling a bit queasy. A clonking sound attracted his attention, and he saw Mad Eye Moody exchanging a few words with a young Auror. Then the magical eye swivelled and regarded him and Charlie, before Moody himself turned around and limped towards them.

"Lovely evening this turned out to be," he growled. "Where is your brother?"

Charlie nodded towards the Ministry building. "Talking to Diggory. Any theories on what happened, Mr Moody?"

"I don't waste my time with theories, sonny. I only deal with facts, and the fact of the matter is that the attack further up the street was meant to draw away the guards stationed here. Can't believe they fell for it..."

"Hey, they had to protect innocent people," Charlie countered.

"Aye, but how many innocent people are going to die now?"

"What are you talking about?" Ron frowned.

"I'm talking about thirteen and a half inches of yew with a phoenix tail feather core," Moody growled.

Ron was feeling really sick now. Voldemort's wand! "Wasn't that thing destroyed?"

"Evidence clerks didn't want to touch the thing. Before we shipped him off to Azkaban, Lucius Malfoy spread the rumour that whoever touched that wand would die a horrible death," Moody said, running a hanky over his ravaged face. "Higher-ups didn't dare touch it either."

"How do you know they took it?"

"I don't know for sure, but that's what I would break into the Department of Magical Law Enforcement's building for if I were a dark creature."

"So it's just a theory," Ron said, relieved.

"Just wait and see," Moody said, smiling wryly.

When Percy came out of the building on shaky legs, Ron knew Moody's speculation had been right on target.

"Voldemort...wand...gone...back," he stammered.

"Get a hold of yourself, Percy," Charlie admonished. "Voldemort is dead!" Several people who'd been standing close to them flinched at

the mention of the name, even though the Dark Lord was no more. The Weasleys however, had no reservations about saying the name out loud anymore, having survived Voldemort's attempts to exterminate them because of their relationship with Harry.

"Aye." Moody nodded. "But do we want to know who really is responsible for this?"

Percy, who had regained some of his senses, finally managed to speak. "We've got news coming in from Australia, Norway and Turkey. They all had similar trouble at exactly the same time. Mostly vampires in Turkey and dark wizards in Australia and Norway."

"Are they connected?" Charlie frowned.

"You can bet your left nut they are!" Moody said. "I reckon Turkey and Australia are diversions." He wiped his forehead again. "Just look around...look at all of us! The same thing is happening in Norway...and neither we nor the Norwegian Ministry will respond to a distress call from Azkaban," Moody said, referring to the wizards who were posted on a small island about a mile from Azkaban Prison. It was a highly unpopular job to have, but someone had to do it. "Something is up in Azkaban."

"But Voldemort's wand..." Ron groaned.

"A bonus, it seems," Charlie said grimly.

"I have to tell Amos about this!" Percy said, and hurried off.

Moody shook his head. "Won't do any good. The bureaucracy will slow things down. First they'll go to the International Confederation of Wizards, who will appoint a committee to conduct an investigation. But the time things get rolling the trouble will be somewhere else. Let's hope that Basham and her Rangers catch these people."

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Privet Drive hadn't changed that much with the passing of years. Some of the homes had obviously had facelifts to keep up with the

times. Many of the cars parked in the driveways were newer models than the ones he remembered as well. He grimaced as he looked at no. 4. Nothing had changed there at all...the same old dull Muggle dwelling. It was time to liven things up a bit!

He strode up to the doorway and willed the door to open. He had to be careful not to use his wand, for the Order of Illumination would be on scene within minutes. And while he could take any one of the Rangers on easily, they'd probably approach him with a vast numerical superiority. So he'd only use his wand to conclude his business at no. 4 Privet Drive.

The door burst open, and he strode in, pausing at the cupboard under the stairs where he knew Vernon kept his tools and grabbed a heavy spanner, before stomping up the stairs. He heard Vernon's loud snoring, and Petunia's deep breaths. He also heard sounds from Dudley's room. Apparently, the fat arse wasn't ready to leave the nest yet. This was just fine with Harry, since he'd have to waste no more valuable time in hunting down Dudley separately.

He kicked in the door to the master bedroom and flicked on the lights. "Wake up! It's judgement day!"

Vernon and Petunia looked at him groggily. "What is the meaning of this! Who are you?"

"Come now, Vernon," Harry said derisively. "Don't you remember me? I'll give you a little hint. I blew up your sister once!"

"You!" Petunia hissed.

"Very good, Aunt Petunia!" he said, practically spitting out her name. "It's too bad little Dudleykins had to inherit Vernon's brains." He paused as a shadow fell across him and recognised the silhouette of a cricket bat. He snapped his fingers, and ropes sprang out of nowhere and tied his assailant up. Dudley crashed to the floor.

"Took you long enough to react, fat arse!" Harry taunted as he looked at Dudley. Then he snapped his fingers again and ropes sprang out of nothing and wrapped themselves around Vernon and Petunia.



"What are you going to do to us?" Petunia whimpered.

"Just a little payback." Harry grinned, walking to the laundry basket, finding one of Vernon's oldest, foulest socks and shoving it into his mouth. "How are your feet, Vernon? Are they still bothering you? You should have lost weight like the doctor ordered, you pig! You know...I can't imagine why you're both so fat. It's not like Aunt Petunia is such a good cook."

He paced about, twiddling his wand between his finger. "What to do, what to do. So many curses to choose from. Hey Vernon, how would you like me to put Dudley under a spell and have him butcher the next door neighbours before I finish you off?"

A muffled grunt came as a reply and Harry laughed. "I can see the headlines. Frustrated youth kills parents and neighbours. And no one will ever know what really happened." He pointed his wand at Dudley. "Would you like me to demonstrate?"

Vernon just glared at him and Petunia whimpered a bit.

He pointed his wand at Dudley, and to his satisfaction, the Dursleys flinched. "Or would you like me to try the Cruciatus Curse? Nasty one that is! It'll make you feel a pain that can't be described by words. I should know...it's been used on me several times. Amazingly, it didn't hurt quite as much as being ignored and mistreated by my family. Did you know, Vernon, that what you did to me...only a small bowl of soup a day...did you know that's abuse?"

"You didn't think I'd let you get away with it, did you? Honestly!" Harry tutted and rolled up his eyes. "Trying to keep me from going to Hogwarts. You should have wised up, Vernon. You should have considered the fact that I'd come back when I was fully trained...and of age! But I guess all the fat is clogging up your brain, isn't it?"

He swung back the heavy monkey spanner and brought it down, connecting with Vernon's foot.

He revelled in Vernon's apparent agony as he did the same to the other foot, and he examined the spanner. "We wizards don't need spanners. Just a flick of the wand...but beating you up with a spanner is so much more satisfying." He laughed. You ought to be glad...Vernon. You've always insisted that I shouldn't use magic!" He aimed his wand at Dudley and kept it trained on him. He smirked as he saw a large wet spot forming on the carpet under Dudley. "Wetting yourself, Dudley?" he chuckled. "I guess you got your wish, Vernon. I did grow up to become a criminal, just like you said I would!" he said, as he proceeded to break Vernon's toes one by one. Then he briefly considered cutting off Vernon's ears, but he decided his point had come across nicely, and that it was time to finish up.

Harry knew he had to finish everyone off within a minute after casting the first spell. Not that he had a problem with that... he just didn't want to spend any more time in that house now that he'd made his point. "Funny...Dudley, how you teased me about having no proper family of my own. Let me show you what happened to my family! Avada Kedavra!" he roared, and the green beam rushed forth out of his wand, sucking the life out of Vernon Dursley. The fat Muggle went limp next to his wife.

Then Harry pointed his wand at Dudley. "Time to join your father. I think I'm going to hang you, or better yet, hang yourself! You don't deserve to die by magic! Besides, Vernon always advocated hanging...didn't he?"

Petunia, who'd been weeping quietly and seemingly slipping into shock, snapped to attention. "No! Not Dudley...please don't kill Dudley. Kill me instead, but let Dudley go!"

Those words jerked Harry back to the memories that had been brought back by the Dementors. His mother had begged Voldemort not to kill him...and his resolve to kill Dudley weakened.

He must have stood there in contemplation for over a minute, because the next thing he knew, he heard voices outside. He recognised Nathan Kelly's booming voice, as well as Patience Gedeon's accented English. He tucked his wand away. "Sorry, I can't

put you out of your misery today...but I'll be back!" he said, before Disapparating.

He Apparated as far away from England as possible. Nobody knew he could now easily Apparate across the world. It was amazing...the feats he could accomplish now that he let his power flow freely. He smiled maliciously. He'd already killed Saleh. That hadn't been a problem. Vernon Dursley was now dead as well. He frowned. Unfortunately, he'd let the weakness resurface when faced with Petunia's pleas. He clenched his fists at the thought. Even though he'd been reborn, rising like a phoenix out of the ashes, some of the ashes still clung to his feathers. That's what had prevented him from finishing Petunia...but soon the ashes would be shaken off, and nothing would stand in his way!

For now he needed to lie low. He didn't have the power to complete his revenge. The Rangers were responding more quickly every time, and he had no doubt that they now knew that he'd returned. He knew Saleh had had the notes on Voldemort's transformations. Harry wasn't thrilled about the prospect of transforming himself like Voldemort had, but he needed the powers that came with the transformation, and he knew his reluctance would dissipate over time. Then he'd have his revenge. First he would start with his enemies, and after they were all dead, he'd punish those who'd turned their backs on the one who'd sacrificed everything to rid them of Voldemort.

The caretaker had told him to learn to embrace the pain that came with loneliness. He would...but he'd teach everyone else to embrace their pain as well! No one would ever take him for granted again!

## Shocking Discoveries

### Chapter 14

Ginny never expected to find even greater danger at home, in the form of her hysterical mother. She gratefully took a deep breath as her mother finally released her from a tight hug.

"I was so worried!" Molly sobbed. "I heard all about it on the wizarding wireless."

"It's okay Mum," Ginny said soothingly. "I don't think anybody got hurt."

"What about Ron?"

"Ron is fine, Mum," she said, and she smiled as she remembered, and told Molly what Ron had said about Harry.

Of course Molly's face lit up as well when she heard the news, but her face darkened shortly afterwards. "Dear, I know you're a grown woman, but I feel it's my duty to advise you against marrying Draco."

"Oh, not you too, Mum!" Ginny groaned. She couldn't bear hearing any more bad things about Draco. "We've been over and over this."

"Now you listen to me, young lady!" Molly said sternly. "What he did tonight proves that he doesn't love you. He just abandoned you in the face of danger! And you don't really love him either. You're just deluding yourself."

"Deluding myself?" Ginny said sharply. "You told me you trusted my judgement, and now I'm deluding myself?"

"I did trust your judgement. But that was before Draco abandoned you...abandoned you, Ginny! And you're always insisting that he loves you. Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?"

"He does love me, Mum, and I love him!"

"Really?" Molly smiled triumphantly. "Then why didn't you go home to Draco? Why did you come here instead?"

It was only then that Ginny fully realised that she'd Apparated home...not Draco's. It had felt like the natural thing to do. In fact, she'd forgotten all about her fight with her mother two days earlier. But she wouldn't admit that to her mother...not now! "It was force of habit...that's all."

Molly shook her head in a very patronising manner. "Whatever you say, dear."

That attitude infuriated Ginny. "Don't talk down to me like that. I'm nearly twenty!" she hissed.

"Then why don't you start acting like it!" Molly said, raising her voice. "Why don't you face the facts? You're marrying Draco to try and forget about Harry. Ginny, you'll only end up hurting yourself more."

"For the last time, I know what I'm doing!" Ginny erupted.

"Keep your voice down!" Molly yelled back. "Angelina and her kids are staying over. You'll wake them up."

"So you're allowed to yell, and I'm not! Fine, just fine!" Ginny pointed out. "In fact, you're the one who started it."

At that moment, Ron and Charlie Apparated into the Burrow, interrupting the impending fight.

"What do you want?" Ginny snapped, as she took notice of her brothers.

"Be quiet Ginny, this is important!" Ron said in a dismissive tone, infuriating Ginny even further. She was sick and tired of being shunted to the bottom of the priority list.

Charlie started speaking immediately. "Mum, you have to owl Bill at once. We have to put heavy wards around the Burrow again."

"What...why...what are earth are you talking about?" Molly snapped.

"Voldemort's wand has been stolen during the attack on Diagon Alley," Ron explained, looking extremely pale. "There could be some Death Eaters about... ones the Ministry didn't catch."

"I'm not saying the Burrow's necessarily a target, but we have to be safe," Charlie continued.

Ginny blanched, and she suddenly felt sick. Death Eaters! And what was that about Voldemort's wand? She'd believed it had been destroyed. She looked at her mother, who had also gone deathly pale.

The fire in the kitchen suddenly surged and changed colour.

"Oh...what now? Who could be calling at this hour?" Molly groaned

Percy's head hovered in the flames soon after. "Mum, Ginny...Hannah's having contractions. I think she went into labour early. She was very upset when she heard about the attack on the wireless...that may have caused it."

"Are you sure these contractions are real?" Ginny asked. "False labour is quite possible at this stage...it can start up to four weeks before the estimated delivery date."

"Pulling aHermione on us?" Ron muttered to Ginny.

Ginny scowled and gave him the one-fingered salute she'd once learned from Colin Creevey.

Percy looked away from the Weasleys. "What's that...your amniotic sac ruptured?"

"Amiotitic what?" Ron frowned quizzically.

"Her water broke!" Ginny snapped impatiently.

Percy looked back at the other Weasleys. "Well Hannah's obviously decided to get it over with. I'm taking Hannah St. Mungo's right away.

We planned to have the baby at home. But under the circumstances I think it's best to take her to St. Mungo's. Good thing I prepared a Port Key just in case. She can't Apparate or travel by Floo like this...I'm going to be a dad!" he said excitedly, and his face disappeared.

The kitchen exploded with excitement, and a sleepy Angelina walked right into the middle of it.

"What's going on?"

"Hannah and Percy are having the baby," Molly said anxiously.

"Come on!" Ron bellowed and Disapparated.

"Ron...oh, typical!" Molly huffed as Ron vanished. "Charlie, Ginny, help Angelina with the kids while I get dressed."

"It's likely to be a long and dull wait, Molly." Angelina yawned. "I'll just stay at home with the children."

"Absolutely not," Molly replied. "You won't be safe here until the wards are in place."

Angelina looked alarmed. "Wards? What are you talking about?"

Molly frowned, and she told Angelina about the attacks in Diagon Alley, causing Angelina to look sick as well as frightened.

After Molly had gone to change, Ginny, Angelina and Charlie managed to get the children ready soon enough, but they were still waiting for Molly to come downstairs twenty minutes later. Then Molly finally came down the stairs, holding two hats. Now that Molly Weasley didn't have to worry about finances anymore, she'd developed quite an obsession with hats. "What do you think, Ginny, blue or tartan?"

"Honestly mum!" Ginny exploded. "The baby won't bloody care what kind of hat you're wearing! Hurry up...I want to help deliver the baby," Ginny added anxiously. She was seriously considering specialising as a midwife too, so this would be a prime learning experience.

"Tartan it is," Molly decided, and placed the hat on her head. "On to St. Mungo's then!" she said brightly, and started the fire.

"I'll take Fred," Charlie said. He was very fond of his godson, and the feeling was mutual. Fred was usually very calm when he was with Charlie. "St Mungo's!" Charlie said and threw a bit of powder into the flames and jumped in after they turned green and roared high.

Then Angelina and Molly followed each with one of the twins, leaving Ginny to carry Arthur, who was growing quite heavy, into the fire.

An instant later she was in the lobby of the wizarding hospital. It was quiet. Ginny guessed that not too many people had got hurt in the attack. She shivered...in the all excitement, she'd forgotten all about it...and Draco. Her insides squirmed guiltily.

"Come on Ginny!" Percy called from a distance. "Mum told me you wanted to help."

Ginny put the sleepy child in her arms on a couch, next to his little brother and the girls, and hurried after Percy.

"The mediwitch in charge said there could be some complications if we wait," Percy explained. "So she speeded up the process a bit. Hannah should deliver within the hour. Thank goodness for magic, you know. The midwife's Muggle-born. Told me some poor Muggle women have to endure eighteen-hour labours sometimes." He shuddered at the thought. "Makes me glad I'm a man," he mumbled.

"Don't let Hannah hear you say that." Ginny grinned. "Mum told me she resented dad for getting her pregnant each and every time she was giving birth. Good thing women forget the pain of childbirth. Otherwise Bill would be an only child."

"I see your point," Percy said delicately. "This way!"

He led her through the corridors of the hospital and to the exact room Hannah was in.



"You're just in time, Mr Weasley..." The mediwitch said...and she looked at Ginny. "Who's this?"

"My sister, Ginny. She's a nurse in training, at Stonehenge. She'd like to witness the birth."

"All right." The mediwitch smiled. "Ginny, stand next to me and pay attention...Mr Weasley, hold your wife's hand."

An hour, and three of Percy's broken fingers later, Hannah was cradling their baby girl, Grace. Ginny had mended Percy's fingers so he could sever the umbilical cord, but in the end the honour was Ginny's, because Percy had had trouble keeping to his feet as he saw the placenta being expelled. Ginny thought he'd surely vomit all over himself, for he looked that nauseous, but he managed to contain himself after the midwife warned him not to be sick in order to avoid contamination.

The baby was pink-faced like her mother, and what little hair she had was a red-golden colour...a compromise between her parent's colours. The baby would probably be allowed to go home with her proud parents because, though a bit early, she wasn't so premature as to need special care. Many twins were born in the 35th week after conception or the 37th week, depending on how one counted, and little Grace was a fairly big baby, Ginny observed.

"She's beautiful," Percy said after he gently kissed Hannah on the lips. "She looks just like you."

Ginny smiled. Hannah had threatened Percy with several horrible deaths during the transitional contractions, but everything seemed to be okay now.

"Grace Virginia Weasley," Hannah said, her tears of joy mingling with the beads of sweat on her face. "Grace after her grandmum, Virginia after her aunt. Would you be her godmother...Ginny?" Hannah asked.

Ginny didn't know what to say. They wanted her to be godmother to that tiny creature. Her heart swelled with pride. It was unlike anything she'd ever felt before.

"I'll take that as a yes?" Percy asked, looking at her silly grin.

"Yes, it would be an honour." Ginny beamed. "Should I go break the news to the family, or do you want to?" she asked Percy.

"You tell them!" Percy said, briefly looking away from his baby. I'm not ready to let go of my baby yet."

Ginny made her way to the waiting room, just overhearing Angelina saying how lucky Hannah had been with such a quick delivery as she walked in. Fred had taken his sweet time in the womb, only coming out after 41 weeks.

"Well...is it a boy or a girl?" Charlie asked. "I bet Ron it would be a girl...well?"

Ginny ignored them and turned to where Molly was standing holding on to Mr Abbott for dear life in suspense, even though it would be her seventh grandchild.

Ginny guessed her mum had most likely called Mr Abbott.

Mrs Abbot, a Muggle-born witch, had been yet another victim of Voldemort's, and Ginny understood why Hannah had wanted to name the baby after her if it turned out to be a girl.

"It's a girl," Ginny revealed.

"Hah! Galleon to me, Ronniekins," she heard Charlie say after a muffled groan from Ron. "And what about the hair colour? Ron said it would be blonde, but I'm betting on good old Weasley red."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but neither of you are right...strawberry-blonde."

"Mummy, where is the baby?" Arthur asked, tugging on Angelina's robes.

"The baby should have been brought to the nursery by now. You can all have a look at her there," Ginny said, as she turned to lead the way.

The entire Weasley clan marched through the corridors of the hospital towards the nursery, and Angelina had Charlie and Ron carry Millie and Susie to prevent them from running off and causing mayhem.

When they rounded the last corner, Ginny expected to see Percy admiring his daughter and boasting about her to any other people who might be present. Instead, she saw Percy restraining a middle-aged Indian wizard, and none other than a rather guilty looking Oliver Wood cowering behind Percy for protection.

"Control yourself sir!" Percy said in his most reasonable tone.

"Do you want me to control myself? That's the vagabond who got my daughter pregnant, and you want me to control myself?" he said, glaring at Wood.

"Wood got someone pregnant?" Ron whispered to Charlie. "That's a surprise...I read in Witch Weekly that he might be gay."

"You read Witch Weekly?" Charlie laughed.

"It was one of the older issues mum's got lying around," Ron said defensively, his face glowing like the setting sun. "I didn't have anything better to do at the time."

"Right!" Charlie teased.

Ron's eyes widened. "Blimey, isn't that Patil...the chairman of the Quidditch league?"

"And Padma and Parvati's dad!" Ginny added, annoyed that Ron made the connection to the Quidditch league before connecting the name to a fellow Gryffindor in his own year.

"Oh, right." He grinned sheepishly. A second later his grin vanished however, and his mouth fell open. "Jumpin' Jarveys...Wood must have got Parvati in trouble!"

Charlie grinned. "Funny coincidence isn't it, Ron? Wood and our Perce both with girls from your year?"

"Huh?" Ron said absently, as he saw Mr Patil reach for his wand and aim at Wood.

"Gentlemen!" Molly admonished, raising her voice. "That is no way to behave to one another! This should be a time of great joy!"

This seemed to calm Patil down, and he put away his wand. "I'm sorry. It's just that it came as quite a shock when Parvati told us, and she didn't want to tell us who the baby's father was either."

"Probably protecting Wood," Charlie muttered. "He would've got traded to the Vultures for sure...forcing him to play abroad."

"Mr Patil..." Wood began earnestly. "I love your daughter very much, and I meant no dishonour to you or your family. Parvati couldn't let anyone know who the father was either." He grinned apologetically. "Her boss assigned her to stalk me! I was her project for a couple of months...conflict of interest, you see?"

Ginny allowed herself a brief smile. Whereas Padma had been a serious correspondent for the Daily Prophet, Parvati had been a gossip journalist for Witch Weekly. Now she understood why Parvati had given that up to become Witch Weekly's Agony Aunt instead. She couldn't follow people around very well while being pregnant! Still, this had come as quite a shock. Parvati must have covered her pregnancy up with several illusion spells, because Ginny hadn't known about Parvati's pregnancy. She also wondered if Parvati spread the rumour that Wood was gay, to scare off the competition. She wouldn't put it past Parvati.

Quick footsteps came echoing down the hall, and soon Ginny saw Padma rushing over to her father. "Parvati...I came as soon as I could. How is she?"

Wood raised an eyebrow. "How'd you know the baby was born? We didn't send word to Nomad Island yet, and it takes a while for post to get there."

Patil's eyes bulged as he looked at his other daughter. "You knew?"

"Of course...and Lavender Brown and Mum knew too!"

Ginny raised her eyebrows at this. She couldn't believe Lavender had managed to keep the secret.

Padma continued. "I could feel Parvati go into labour," she explained to Wood. "It's a twin thing."

"Ah," was all Wood managed to say.

"Well, where is my nephew?" she asked, looking through the glass. Just then, two nurses came out and carried two babies into the nursery.

"Awww," Everybody sighed tenderly and Millie and Susie shoved their way forward through the jungle of adults, pressing their faces to the glass, making funny faces at the babies.

"The world has been blessed with another Patil." Mr Patil said, eyeing the black-haired baby boy.

"What?" Wood burst out hotly. "Patil? That's Wood, old man...Oliver Jr."

"Stop it!" Molly warned, and both men cowered as Molly's kindly face turned into that of a sabre-toothed tiger. She pointed at Percy and Mr Abbott, who were beaming and shaking hands. "That's how you ought to be behaving."

"Boss!" A distressed sounding voice echoed through the hall. "We've got some serious trouble, boss!"

Percy's head whipped around. "What is it Seamus?"

"I just got a message from Bertha McDonald."

Ginny frowned. Bertha McDonald was a senior Auror, and spokeswoman for the Auror Office. She wondered if Seamus carried news about the attacks.

"Someone used the killing curse at number four Privet Drive. It killed Vernon Dursley! The Aurors said that four Rangers of Illumination were already there when they arrived."

Ginny had to lean on Charlie for support...her legs felt like spongy pillars. Who'd want to kill the Dursleys?

"Boss," Seamus glanced around nervously. "The Rangers know who did it...it was the same wizard who devastated Petra?"

Percy paled. "So it's true...Voldemort has managed to return again?"

Seamus shook his head. "No." He took a deep breath. "Worse...this wizard is more powerful. Percy..." Seamus said, forgetting to use the usual nickname he used. "It was Harry...Harry Potter. He's alive...and by the looks of it, he's out for revenge! There's..."

"No!" Ginny's scream rattled the glass and the babies in the nursery started to cry. "No, it can't be true!" she moaned...her head feeling as if it were being crushed by the grip of a troll...and her heart felt like it was being torn apart by a pack of savage dogs. "Harry wouldn't...never!"

She had trouble breathing, and the lights in the room seemed to grow dimmer and dimmer. She distantly heard her mother call her name. That was the last thing she heard. She withdrew into herself, shutting out the cruel universe.

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Ron leaned on a nearby wall for support just as Seamus caught Ginny. Harry was alive...and he'd killed Vernon Dursley. And Harry was also behind Petra...but it didn't make sense. Attacking the

Dursleys was understandable. After all, they'd treated Harry like vermin. But attacking a bunch of innocent wizards in Petra?

He started pacing about, forgetting everyone around him. He needed to be analytical about this...Petra had been attacked...with several casualties. The same thing happened tonight but thankfully no one died...at least, not in England. But maybe the Norwegians, Turks or Australians hadn't been so lucky.

Ron clenched his fists. Harry sure hadn't wasted any time in gathering a bunch of evil followers. Dismayed, he shook his head. So Malfoy had been telling the truth after all. Ron knew he should have felt glad...now that he'd been proven right. But he didn't, he couldn't...because too many lives were at stake. Harry would thunder over them like a herd of Graphorns.

"Ron?" Percy called, bringing Ron out of his thoughts. "There's a Ranger waiting to see us in the waiting room."

"Ranger, what Ranger?" Ron frowned.

"Haven't you been listening to me? A Ranger accompanied me here," Seamus said.

Ron nodded and cast a glance at Ginny. It broke his heart. She was in terrible pain...because it was obvious that she loved that murderous maniac more than life itself. She just couldn't believe it.

When they arrived in the waiting room Ron saw the Ranger wasn't anything like he'd expected her to be. The first thing that he noticed about her was a tight-fitting, purple shirt that read 'Girls Rule, Guys Drool', and that left her pierced belly button exposed. Under it she wore tight fitting pants of some stretchy, clingy material, and the sole of one of her dragon-hide boots made a clicking sound as she tapped it impatiently.

She was about Hermione's size and had the same build...Ron assessed as he gave her a once-over. Her eyes were pale blue and her hair was short, and deliberately styled so it looked wild and unkempt. It was red...scarlet...not a natural colour. Her face was full

of iron, with several rings through her eyebrows, ears and nose. All in all, she looked scary! A cigarette dangled out of the corner of her mouth. He also half expected to see the slogan, 'magic sucks', inked across her knuckles but apparently she hadn't got around to doing that yet.

"Please, miss, you have to put that out," a young orderly said.

"Bite me!" she grumbled at him.

"Miss, I must insist..."

She heaved a sigh and extinguished the cigarette on the white floor, causing the orderly to wrinkle his nose in disgust. Then she pulled out a small ring. She pointed her wand at it, and it grew as large as a hoop.

"Grab on!" she said.

Percy and Ron just looked at her, still shocked by her appearance.

"Well, what the hell are you waiting for?"

Hesitantly, they grabbed the hoop.

"There, it doesn't bite, does it?" she sighed. "Beam me up...Scotty!" she said melodiously, and the Port Key activated itself, whisking them away to what seemed to be...Ron didn't know where he was.

"Beam me up..." Seamus began. "Scotty?" Percy finished, puzzled.

"Muggle-born humour," a voice said. "Don't mind Gudrun. She's a bit eccentric, but she's all right deep down."

Percy, Ron and Seamus looked and saw a dark woman standing with her hands on her hips.

"Lieutenant Diatta." Percy smiled, walking over to her with his hands outstretched.



She returned his smile and took his hands. "Congratulations on your fatherhood." Her face went sombre. "I just wish we didn't have to meet under these circumstances."

"I understand." Percy said solemnly. "You wanted to talk to me about...Harry."

"I need to give you a full briefing. As we speak, other Rangers are informing Ministries all across the world. My first advice would be to stay out of his way."

"How can you say that!" Ron exploded angrily. "He needs to be stopped."

"Agreed, but that's our job." Diatta frowned.

"Oh yes, your job!" Ron mocked. "Well let me tell you something. I don't trust you! You're the ones who convinced everybody that Harry was really dead. I don't think you can do your jobs properly," Ron said. He didn't have the least bit of faith in these people.

"Really?" Diatta said, half-angry yet amused as well. "Tell me, then, what do you think?"

Ron gathered his thoughts. This was his chance to mobilise everybody against Harry. "Okay, I'll tell you what I think. I think Harry faked his death and crossed over to the other side, after learning all your secrets. And now he and his minions are attacking everyone and everything."

"And your evidence is..." Diatta smiled.

"Well...it's true, isn't it? Harry attacks Petra, and now he and his minions attack England..."

Diatta laughed. "You're wrong in so many ways it's going to take me a long time to set you straight. How can you jump to conclusions like that with no evidence to support your theory? I don't understand what Hermione sees in you."

Despite his anger, her words made Ron's stomach do flip-flops. Had Hermione told this woman about him? And she'd said "sees" instead of "saw", when referring to Hermione. Could this imply that Hermione still had feelings for him?

Before Ron could voice his questions, Diatta continued. "Listen, we want you to know that we think that Harry and the attacks are not connected. Harry had a specific target in Petra. It wasn't a random act of violence. Omar Saleh was the last person killed in the Petra attack. He had been the target. Harry hated Death Eaters more than anything, correct?"

"Omar Saleh? The Death Eater?" Ron frowned.

"What are you talking about?" Percy asked anxiously.

"In our seventh year, Harry, Hermione and I met with Dumbledore and Snape. Saleh was a rite-master who specialised in transformation rituals. Snape told us so. But he was never found after Harry killed Voldemort. He was hiding out in Petra?"

Diatta nodded. "We think Harry wants revenge...and we don't think today's attacks are linked with him in any way. The four attacks that occurred a couple of hours ago turned out to be a diversion for an extraction of certain prisoners from Azkaban. Even though no distress call came when the attacks occurred, our analysts figured out their purpose. We went to Azkaban immediately. We had to fight off the Dementors, who'd been trying to cover something up. The Ministry wizard who are posted on the monitoring island didn't have a clue about the breakout...it was very carefully planned." Diatta shook her head sadly. "We found the soulless bodies of forty Muggles...and the disappearance of four dark wizard from the prison, two of which were Death Eaters, and two whom we strongly suspected to be supporters of Voldemort. Horatiu Chivu, Tetsuo Yamato, Ivan Maximov and Lucius Malfoy...so you understand why we believe that Harry is not in league with them. These men would all be on his hit list. We believe that no one will be hurt, as long as they don't get in Harry's way."

Ron rocked back on his heels. Lucius Malfoy was free once more! That was almost worse news than Harry's rampage.

"So you're just going to wait for Harry to finish them all off before you capture him?" Seamus frowned.

"Of course not!" Diatta said, shocked. "We've seen that he's willing to go over the dead bodies of innocent people to get to the object of his revenge. We can't allow that to happen. That's why we want you, Ron, to help us. Maybe you could reach out to him...and have him turn himself in.

Ron doubted that he could contribute anything, but he was willing to give it a try. He sighed and rubbed his temples. What Diatta had said about Harry also made sense. He'd been wrong to immediately conclude that Harry was in league with the Diagon Alley attackers. But he still didn't discount the possibility. If Harry's rampage's intended targets were indeed only Death Eaters, then Ron thought it might be possible to swing him around. But he couldn't do it alone. He needed Hermione. "I won't be able to do it alone. Hermione will have to be there too."

"She will be," Diatta assured him.

Ron sighed with relief. That was something then...but he was still uneasy about the whole situation. What Harry had done was unforgivable...killing those innocent wizards and goblins...and to a lesser extent, Vernon Dursley. What Harry had done now, dwarfed the severity of what he'd done to Ron. He'd be fed to the Dementors for sure, or at least executed, since the Dementors had just proven themselves unreliable. This was going to kill Ginny! He groaned inwardly.

Then there was still the unlikely possibility that Harry had really turned evil beyond redemption. That thought gave Ron pause. When had he changed his mind about Harry? Even earlier this evening he'd been ready to believe that Harry had managed to recruit an army of evil minions in a few short months. Of course, upon reflection, he now realised that this wasn't really possible. But still... He'd been able to picture Harry being behind some random attacks around the world, and now he was somehow doubting that Harry was capable of that. He buried his face in his hands and shuddered. Deep down, he knew

what he wanted to believe about Harry. That he'd been wrong about him all along.

They were taken back to St. Mungo's by the eccentric Ranger Gudrun, and Ron went outside into the court-yard for some fresh air. He really needed it.

"Ron...what are you doing out here all by yourself?"

Not recognising the voice, Ron turned around. It was Padma. She walked over to the bench he was sitting on, sat down beside him, and started to nervously fiddle with her robes. "So, how have you been?"

"Great, just great!" he snapped.

She recoiled a bit, looking surprised and a bit shocked. "You don't have to bite my head off."

"Sorry," he said quickly. He didn't know why, but Padma made him nervous. He still felt a bit guilty about the Yule Ball in their fourth year. "How's Ginny?"

"Devastated." Padma replied. "Is there a problem, between us...Ron?" she then asked. "I mean, you've always been nervous and edgy around me. I'd like to know why."

"I haven't been nervous and edgy around you. Why do you say that?" Ron asked, hoping that he wasn't revealing the nervousness he was definitely feeling.

She shrugged. "I don't know. At school you always seemed to go out of your way to avoid me...Oh, never mind. It was probably my imagination, wasn't it?"

"Maybe...not completely." Ron forced the words out of his mouth. "I mean, I always sort of felt a little guilty for treating you the way I did at the ball."

"Really...I hadn't noticed," Padma said airily. "You seemed preoccupied with Hermione."

Ron flinched a little as he heard the name. "Well, you've got me there."

"You miss her, don't you?"

Ron looked at her, and saw a knowing smile on her face. Padma had him figured out. "I guess."

"She's a great person." Padma nodded. "I guess it's no shame that she beat me in every single subject. Gosh, I really was jealous of her. She had Harry Potter's friendship... the best marks...you."

Ron shrugged. "I don't why you're jealous about that." Ron shrugged. "Being Harry's best friend was a dangerous thing..." His eyes widened as he realised what she'd said. ...the best marks...you. He swallowed and looked at her. "Padma...did I just understand you correctly? Did you just say..."

Padma was now madly fiddling with her robes and looked at her feet. "Yes...you heard me right."

"But...but...I always thought you never even liked me, you know, because I was poor. I saw how you looked at my robes at the ball. I didn't really care at the time, since I had other things on my mind," he said, blushing. "But I did note it, and it stung a bit afterwards."

Padma startled him by taking his hand. "I'm sorry about that. I was biased back then. I thought no money equalled no class. But I guess I forgot my roots. My parents had to work hard to get where they are. I guess I took them for granted. But I grew up."

"I was a little biased too," Ron admitted. "About giants and all that. But I guess Hagrid proved me wrong," Ron said, as he remembered how Hagrid and Madam Maxime had managed to swing a few giants into Dumbledore's camp.

They sat for a while in comfortable silence, and Ron regarded her profile in the moonlight. She was rather pretty, prettier than Hermione, if he was completely honest. But still, there was something about

Hermione that no other women had. A perfect combination of all the virtues, and very few vices to oppose them, unlike him, he thought

"Is Hermione seeing anyone?" he asked out of the blue.

Padma suddenly went rigid. "I'm not sure."

"What do you mean? You don't know? Come on, I can take it."

"I saw her just before I started feeling Parvati's pain. I wanted to say hello, but she was pretty far away and she'd just entered an alley, so I hurried to catch up to her. I saw her kissing another Ranger...I'm sorry!" she added miserably.

Ron's heart shattered into a million pieces. He'd thought he'd be able to take it, but it was painfully clear that he'd been wrong. What he was feeling now was worse than what he'd felt upon hearing the news about Harry and Malfoy put together.

"I'm sorry, Ron." Padma said. Ron hadn't even noticed when she'd started to wipe the tears off his face with a handkerchief. He hadn't even realised that he'd been crying, and he was even more surprised by the fact that he wasn't the least bit embarrassed about breaking down in front of Padma like that. He just didn't care anymore.

"Well, I reckon it had to happen someday," he said in between sobs. "I mean, she's too great a girl to remain single for long, isn't she?" He looked at Padma. "You know, when we were still at Hogwarts, I was always afraid that something like this might happen."

"What do you mean?" Padma asked.

Ron didn't answer immediately. He'd always been afraid that Harry would break them up by running off with Hermione. He shook his head at his own stupidity. Harry and Hermione had just been friends. He'd always chosen to listen to his own insecurities instead of Hermione...and Harry. He uttered a rueful chuckle, realising that not all that long ago, he'd have been finding a way to pin the blame for this turn of events on Harry, as well. It had taken losing Hermione to give him this moment of lucidity. "I lost her because I'm stupid. I

always thought that she and Harry were attracted to one another, and that they would get together as soon as the circumstances were right. I didn't have enough sense to trust them."

Padma looked genuinely surprised at this and Ron was just as amazed at what he'd just admitted. "So you don't believe Harry to be evil anymore?" Padma asked.

"Not for putting the Cruciatus on me...no," Ron said, feeling the pent up pressure that he'd carried for nearly three years drain away. "But he can't get away with what he did in Petra. We need to bring him in, but they'll kill him if we do...and it'll be my fault," he groaned, as his head spun with the sudden realisation. If he hadn't been such a stubborn idiot, Harry wouldn't have fallen to darkness. "It's all my fault!"

Padma scooted closer to him and wrapped her arm around him. "Don't do that to yourself. The rest of us are just as responsible for it. And if you absolutely have to blame someone...blame You-Know-Who. He's the one who's ultimately responsible," she whispered.

That sounded an awful lot like something Hermione would say. Ron turned and stared straight into her face... the tips of their noses rubbing together as he turned his face. He felt a tingle of electricity spread from his nose throughout his face, and he flushed. He looked into her compassionate dark eyes.

"You can't blame yourself over something you didn't have any control over," she continued. "It isn't your fault."

He nodded, and her face grew ever more present in his vision, until her eyes were all he could see. Then he leaned in...and kissed her. It wasn't a deep kiss but it was warm and sweet, and oddly comforting. His mind was buzzing, but he broke through the buzz and he pulled back a little. "I'm sorry...I...wasn't thinking."

"Neither was I," Padma said softly, her warm and sweet breath caressing his cheeks. "I didn't mean for this to happen...I just came out here to convince you that Harry wasn't really evil. I...I'm sorry, I'm not that kind of woman. It's just that...I'm so lonely."

Ron thought her hair felt really nice as he tucked a silky black lock behind her ear. "How can you be lonely? You can have any man you want. You're bright, beautiful and really nice."

"Nice...me?" Padma smiled. "You're the first man to ever call me nice."

"You've been really nice to me just now." Ron whispered. "But why are you lonely? Are all the men in Concordia stupid?"

"No...just the ones I like. And if there's a good one..." She stared into Ron's eyes. "...he's taken."

"Well, I'm free now...and I think I'll be going to Concordia soon. Maybe we could get to know each other a bit better then."

Padma sighed. "You belong with Hermione. I could never take her place in your heart."

"No...Hermione and I are through." Ron said, feeling utterly defeated.

"No you're not." Padma smiled. "The obstacle between you is gone. If you fight for her, I'm sure you'll win her back."

Ron raised his eyebrows. "Really? So you reckon my competition isn't that formidable?"

Padma looked away. "Well, I don't know him really well, but from what I know of him, he's a heroic type like you and Harry...and he's really handsome...but I still think you've got a good chance!" she said quickly.

Ron didn't share Padma's apparent optimism. "What's his name?"

"Max Wolfe."

Max Wolfe...why did that name sound familiar? It clicked...Ginny had told him about a Ranger named Max Wolfe...a distant relative of theirs. "I don't know, Padma. He sounds like a perfect man."



"Well, he's far from perfect...I'm actually quite shocked that he and Hermione got together. They didn't seem to get along before he slipped into that coma."

"Yeah, well Hermione and I didn't get along either at first," Ron pointed out.

"Stop being so insecure," Padma said. "If I say you've got a chance with her then you've got a chance with her! Besides, Hermione may not be able to hold onto him. She has a devastatingly gorgeous rival."

"That's never stopped Hermione before," Ron said gloomily. "She can be really attractive too." He remembered how Krum had picked Hermione over a lot of other girls.

"Maybe." Padma frowned, but she was still looking unconvinced. "It's just that the other woman and Wolfe have a history together...it's all really strange..." she muttered.

"Either way, thanks for your support," Ron said. "I wish there was something I could do to show how much I appreciate our talk."

Padma took his hand and guided him to his feet. Then she took out her wand and transfigured the bench they'd been sitting on into a piano. She waved her wand and it started playing a Weird Sisters tune. "How about we correct a mistake we made in the past."

Ron smiled and bowed. "May I have this dance, Padma?"

"I thought you'd never ask, Ron!" she giggled.

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Hermione's intestines twisted with worry as she, a mediwizard and a mediwitch listened to the wizarding wireless. There had been attacks on wizarding settlements in northern Australia, Turkey, Norway and England. She hoped that everybody was okay.

"We've just received some additional information," the newscaster said. "The Order of Illumination has just officially revealed information that hints at the survival of Harry Potter. This happened after Wizards from the British Ministry of Magic reacted to the detection of a killing curse, finding the Rangers of Illumination on scene. It turns out that he is also suspected of the attack in Petra. They have stressed, however, that they have no indication that Harry Potter is in any way involved with the culprits of tonight's attacks. According to the Order, Potter's target in Petra was a Death Eater in hiding. The fact the tonight's attacks turned out to be a diversion to free four Death Eaters, supports their theory. They stress that Potter is not to be engaged by anyone except Rangers of Illumination, and that there is no reason to panic, since Potter only seems to be after his enemies. However, they will make every effort possible to put a stop to Potter in order to prevent him from harming innocents."

"But why murder that Muggle?" the newscaster's partner asked.

"It turns out that the Muggle was Potter's uncle by marriage and guardian, and that he'd heavily abused Potter in his childhood. Inside information reveals that Potter was forced to live inside a cramped cupboard under the stairs from his second to his eleventh year of life, and that starvation and heavy physical labour were frequent punishments used to discourage wand-less Magic, something no young wizard has control over. "

"I wouldn't call it murder, then...Animals aren't murdered!" the mediwizard spat. "Good riddance! I don't really blame him for killing the Muggle."

Hermione only vaguely heard this, however. She was too shocked...and angry! Why had the Order revealed Harry's survival?

"Hermione!" Galatea's voice echoed through the lab. Her silvery white hair flowed behind her as she hurried across the lab, and from the corner of her eye, Hermione saw the mediwizard's face going purple and started smoothing his hair as he saw Galatea. That stirred a memory in Hermione's mind, but she was too preoccupied with the news bulletin to pay much attention to it.

She looked at Max, who had stopped in the doorway to the lab. He looked distant and a lot of things seemed to trouble him. The haunted look he'd had before his coma had now returned full-blown.

"We heard!" Galatea said anxiously. "We have to go. Are you done here?"

Hermione nodded. "We were just finished when the emergency broadcast had been announced."

"Max?" Galatea asked, startling the frowning Ranger out of his thoughts. "The Port Key?"

He nodded and pulled out the little ring that grew into a hoop, and they all grabbed on to it. "Activate!"

They were whisked away from the two bewildered mediwizards and transported what looked like the lower deck of a Cruiser. She recognised it as the warship, Hurricane.

"My condolences, Wolfe," Matt Kelly, who looked up from his work, said. He was repairing a heavy crossbow.

"Yes, I'm sorry about Lei!" Gudrun Njallsdottir added. She was a Muggle-born witch from Iceland, and a Ranger Fifth Class. Hermione almost didn't recognise her in uniform, and without the many metal ornaments stuck in her face.

Max gave them a small nod.

Seconds later, she felt the ship lurch into motion, and Lieutenant Gaal's face appeared on a communication mirror. "Get up here!" As he said that, a circle detached itself from the ceiling and came down. They stepped on and it carried them up to the bridge.

"Why did you tell them about Harry?" Hermione burst out.

"We had to. There was no way to cover up the fact that Harry killed Vernon Dursley," Diatta said calmly. "The Ministry wizards were also relatively quick to respond."

"Why didn't you Oblivate Dudley and Petunia?" Hermione asked. "You could've done that."

"Assuming that we would have had enough time to set up our jammers to avoid the Ministry detection equipment from picking up those charms, we still wouldn't have done it. We were operating inside British wizarding territory without their foreknowledge. And wouldn't it be highly suspicious if they'd found us there with two Muggles with no memories?" Diatta shook her head. "This was a surprise move...we weren't prepared for it. The truth was the only way out. If we'd had a bit more time, we could have changed their memories and have them remember that they'd been out of the house when Vernon was murdered. But it was after midnight...and there was no way that would stand up to closer scrutiny."

Hermione's anger abated a bit. "I understand...but it came as a shock. What will we do now?"

"We stop Harry as soon as possible. We will try to bring him in with no bloodshed, but if he resists we have our orders," Diatta said grimly. "Either way, he's as good as dead. People want retribution for Petra. He'll be executed after we capture him."

"But what if he's being controlled by someone else?" Hermione said, her heart beginning to race as the implications sunk in. Harry was as good as dead. The mere thought of Harry being in this much danger was making her feel ill, and that irritated her. How many times had she seen him in danger in the past? She ought to be used to it by now. But here she was leaning on Galatea for support.

"That's why we will do whatever we can to bring him in alive." Diatta sighed. "But the people will be wanting a scapegoat. The only way Harry is going to survive this, if he is indeed being controlled, is if we catch those who are controlling him."

"What do you mean if he's being controlled?" Hermione yelled. She couldn't believe this...Now the Rangers were turning their back on Harry too! Her anger quickly overcame the sickening feeling. "Of course he's being controlled! We all know he can resist the Imperius

Curse, but there are other, more powerful ways to take over people's minds," she said, remembering what Max had said after she'd woken up after fainting in the amphitheatre. Harry's been gone for months," Hermione pointed out. "What if they worked on him until he cracked?"

"I'm sorry, but his killing Vernon Dursley doesn't fit that profile. It really looks like he's doing this of his own free will." Diatta said with a pained expression on her face.

Hermione shook her head. "You're wrong! You don't know Harry!"

"I beg to differ, Lieutenant," Max said, in a hoarse voice and a he cleared it. "It could still fit in the profile. They could have conditioned him without the use of magic, using his hatred towards his targets as a motivator. The Dursleys abused Harry, and I'm sure that left a mark on him. That would make them valid targets as well. I'm surprised that the newscaster got a better read on the situation than you did, Lieutenant... no offence, but you're a bit narrow minded right now!"

Diatta's jaw dropped, and Hermione felt a rush of gratitude towards Max. He never said much, but whenever he did say something it always made sense. She could kiss him...but Galatea wouldn't appreciate that, Hermione thought guiltily.

Gaal turned away from his console. "Whether or not Harry's being controlled isn't relevant, Granger. Right now we have to concentrate on catching him. There are lots of wild theories surfacing about us being in league with the attackers to take over the world! We're running out of time!"

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A/N: Well, before the site went down, I'd been dreaming about reaching the magical 200 reviews mark before chapter sixteen. But it seems many people have forgotten how to review...or maybe they're just on holiday. My story isn't that bad...is it? I mean, chapters twelve and thirteen only got 8 reviews between them, whereas the previous chapters averaged at over 10 reviews each. Special thanks to those who kept reviewing.

Anyway, I hope you've enjoyed the chapter. I'll just go wallow in my own insecurities some more. Please Review. I'd like to know what to think of the revisions, oh noble readers. My beta reader put in a lot of hard work correcting most of my stupid mistakes and supplying me with some thoughts. The name for Concordia's make-out spot Senu Alley...sensually, was her idea. J Thanks, Anne!

## Second Chances

### Chapter 15

Draco paced about restlessly. She hadn't cancelled the wedding yet, but as things were going it was only a matter of time. Nothing he had said or done had improved her disposition towards him. He was sure the Weasleys were poisoning her mind so she'd reject him.

He'd started pondering the reasons for her distant behaviour over the last month and he'd drawn a couple of conclusions.

First of all, she wasn't as in love with him as he'd previously imagined. That mysterious mind-reader had given him a clue about that when he'd approached Draco. So logically, Ginny was being cautious.

Secondly, there was the fact that he'd Apparated away when the attack began, instead of remaining in the path of danger like a stupid Gryffindor. She really hadn't appreciated that, and she'd been staying at her mother's ever since, to 'reflect on their relationship!'

He needed a solution to address both these problems at once. Putting her under the Imperius would be such a solution, but the Ministry had recently improved their magical detection methods. Whereas in the past they'd had to limit themselves to households with under aged Muggle-borns, they now had the ability to monitor wizarding households as well. However, in large wizarding households with many magical artefacts and wizards casting magic into the air, the detection method wasn't reliable. But it was sophisticated enough to detect the use of unforgivable curses despite magical interference. Indeed, that had been the primary goal in its design. So the Imperius was out of the question.

Then he had it...an enslavement collar! It worked like the Imperius but it was much more subtle. Of course, he could hardly fasten a collar around her neck. That would be too obvious. No...he had to figure something out. He needed something inconspicuous.

He smirked. There was that silly ring that Potter had given her for her sixteenth birthday...the one she refused to take off. It was a cheap

thing really, and when he'd pointed that out to her, she told him that its value came from the one who'd given her the ring. All he needed to do was to fashion an exact duplicate of the ring and have it charmed and transformed into an enslavement ring. Since she always wore it, no one would ask any questions.

Draco could really appreciate the irony of the situation. Indirectly, Potter would be helping him get Ginny back. This was sort of a double irony even, for Potter's return from the dead was no doubt a third reason why Ginny had been so distant lately, and now he'd be using a gift Potter had given her to secure her obedience.

What he couldn't appreciate however, was the fact that Potter would no doubt try to kill him if he found out where Draco lived. So he had to move. And he had just the place in mind...a place Potter wouldn't dare to attack him!

\*

"You want to do what?" Percy Weasley asked incredulously.

Draco suppressed a smirk with all his willpower as he looked at Amos Diggory pleadingly. He'd made sure to accidentally walk in on the Minister's meeting with Weasley, so the Minister would be present and Weasley would look really bad if he'd refuse. "I'd like to move to the Burrow," he repeated. "I'll be safe from Potter there."

"Guilty conscience, Malfoy?" Weasley smirked.

"Not at all!" Draco retorted. "I've only told your brother about this, and I made him promise not to tell anybody else because I knew it would hurt Ginny...but after I was acquitted, Harry threatened that he'd make sure I wouldn't escape my punishment. He clearly believes that I'm guilty, and that makes me a target. But I'm sure he won't blast through your family like he killed those innocent people in Petra. I think they mean too much to him!"

"How can you be sure?" Percy frowned. "I don't want to endanger my family."



"I understand." Draco nodded. "But imagine the inevitable backlash against the Ministry my death would cause if the people find out that you could have sheltered an innocent man and you didn't. We both know that I am innocent, and my death will cause everyone to panic, because they'll think no one will be safe from Potter anymore."

"He's right, Percy," Diggory said. "He needs to be sheltered."

"Why can't he go to a safe-house?" Weasley argued.

"I could go to a safe-house, if that'll make you feel better, but truth be told, I'd like to work on my relationship with Ginny. I know what I did in the attack was cowardly...in fact, what I'm doing now is cowardly as well, but I'm changing...you know I am. I'd like to live long enough to redeem myself. Besides, who is going to guard me in that safe-house? I didn't know you had any Aurors to spare at the moment."

"We don't." Diggory nodded and looked at Weasley. "Percy, I can't force your family to take him in, but for the sake of the British wizarding world it would be good if you did."

Again Draco had to suppress a smirk. That had just been too easy.

Weasley sighed. "If you can convince my mother, Amos, he can stay...because I'm sure not going to face my mother's wrath for this!"

Diggory paled. "Ah, well...I understand your mother is fond of hats these days?"

Percy smiled weakly. "Well, presenting her with a really nice hat might improve your chances a bit."

\*

Ginny listlessly played with her dinner.

The house had been quiet ever since they had rushed Angelina to St. Mungo's where she'd given birth to Cassidy and Duncan, bringing the Weasley grandchildren total to nine. Thankfully, George had had the sense to return a week before the expected delivery to be present

when the babies were born. Angelina would never have forgiven him if he'd missed the birth of his children.

After giving birth, Angelina had decided to return to the large manor house in a secluded area the Welsh countryside. She and George had moved there when she'd been expecting Fred. Ginny couldn't help being impressed with the house every-time she visited it. It was really a beautiful place, and no less than two resident House-elves maintained the place. There used to be three, but one of them had begged George for clothes because Susie and Millie had targeted her for the practical jokes. In the end, the situation had been resolved by assigning the elf to a different household to prevent it from being dishonoured by clothes, and a new house-elf would soon be appointed to the manor house. According to Angelina, it was a no-nonsense elf who had an excellent record for taming troublesome children...just what she needed.

Ginny sighed as her mind wandered to Harry. What little hunger she'd had disappeared instantly as her thoughts strayed over to him. What had possessed him to do those things? She couldn't believe that he'd done those things of his own free will...Maybe he was being controlled. That had to be it!

"Thinking about Harry again, dear?" her mother asked. "I'm sure Hermione won't let anything happen to him, you know."

Ginny nodded silently. She'd owed Hermione for information, but her friend had informed her that she wasn't allowed to discuss the situation with any outsiders. Ginny understood the need for security, but that didn't make it any less painful or frustrating.

She looked at her mother. "Do you think Harry's evil...Mum?"

"He may have done some evil things dear, but he isn't beyond redemption."

Ginny's swallowed to remove a lump from her throat, and tears began to leak out of her eyes. She'd been crying a lot lately...every time she remembered what Harry's inevitable fate would be. "But they won't

give him a chance to redeem himself, Mum. They'll kill him as soon as they find him."

Molly got up, walked around the table and gave her daughter a much needed hug. "I don't know what'll happen to him, dear. I really don't. I hope Ron will be able to convince him to return to the good side." Ron had left for Concordia earlier that day, to help the Rangers bring Harry in.

"But why would he do that?" Ginny sobbed. "If he gives himself up they're just going to kill him."

"I'm so sorry!" Molly sighed. "I wish Professor Dumbledore were alive. He'd know what to do...because I don't. I hope Hermione finds a way to keep him alive. And you know, there's still a small chance that he's being controlled. If they can prove that, maybe they'll let him go. But if he survives this, his life is going to be very hard. The families of the dead won't forgive him. He'll be marked for life."

"I'll be right there beside him, Mum!" Ginny said fiercely. "I won't ever leave him alone again."

Her mother managed a smile. "Does this mean you're cancelling the wedding?"

Ginny nodded. "You were right, as usual." She sighed. "I can't marry Draco. Harry's the one for me," she added, knowing that she'd stand by Harry for better or for worse.

At that moment, someone knocked on the door. Molly's eyes widened and drew her wand and Ginny did the same. They weren't expecting any company, and with the magical wards in place no one could Apparate or Floo into the Burrow. "Who is it?" Molly called.

"It's Amos, Molly."

"Amos Diggory?"

"Yes!"

"How do I know it's really you?" Molly challenged.

"I thought you'd be expecting me," Diggory said. "Didn't Percy tell you I'd be coming over?"

The fireplace roared and changed colour and Percy's head floated in the flame. "Mum? Did Amos call at the house yet? I should have called you but Hannah needed me to help with the baby so she could have some sleep, and it slipped my mind, and..."

"As a matter of fact, he's at the door," Molly interrupted, putting her wand away. "You should have called, I really made quite a fool of myself just now." She sighed, and Ginny giggled. "Why is Amos here, anyway?"

Percy paled. "Ah, well...he'll tell you. Bye Mum!" Percy said quickly, and his head disappeared.

Molly sighed and removed a protection spell from the door and opened it. "Hello, Amos..." she began warmly, before she noticed somebody else. "Draco!" she said in a voice so cold that it caused the room temperature to drop ten degrees.

Ginny frowned. What was Draco doing here?

"Err, m-may we come in, Molly...I-I bought you a little something," Amos stammered, looking extremely uncomfortable.

Molly stepped aside to allow them in, glaring at Draco. Then she turned her attention to the box Amos was carrying. She took it and unwrapped it with the flick of her wand.

Ginny and Molly both gasped as they saw the contents. It was a very chic black velvet hat, and Molly couldn't hide her delight. "But what's the occasion?"

"Amos looked uncomfortable. The Ministry would really appreciate it if you could take Draco in for a while, at least until the whole situation with Harry Potter is over.

Ginny's anger rose. They were speaking about Harry as if he were some sort of criminal!

"We have reason to believe that Draco might be a target," Amos continued.

"Why?" Molly asked.

Draco looked at Ginny apologetically. "I didn't tell you this before, because I didn't want to hurt you...I know how you feel about Harry. But after my trial, he threatened me. He hadn't believed that I had nothing to do with Voldemort. I told Ron, but I made him promise not to tell you...because...I didn't want to hurt you. I'm sorry, Ginny."

"You're lying!" Ginny snapped.

"I'm afraid it's the truth, Ginny." Amos sighed. "Ron had confirmed this before he left this afternoon."

Ginny just shook her head and ran up to her room, holding in her tears. It couldn't be true...it just couldn't be! She knew Harry too well! He'd never do that.

\*

"Why should I keep him here?" Mrs Weasley snapped. "He hasn't been here for five minutes, and he's already hurt Ginny!"

"Molly, think of the consequences if Harry kills an innocent man. Lest we forget, Draco has been acquitted after a very thorough Ministry investigation. Harry's already feared. If he kills Draco, there will be panic."

Draco saw that Mrs Weasley was thinking it over. "All right...he can stay!" she then said, talking about Draco as if he wasn't there. Then she turned to look at him. "But you had better stay away from my daughter, is that understood?"

Draco nodded.

"Good. You'll be staying in Ron's old room, under the attic."

"Under the attic? Where the ghoul lives?" Draco asked, wrinkling his nose. It seemed as if Mrs Weasley planned to make his stay as uncomfortable as possible. But he smiled inwardly...because she'd have no choice but to change her attitude towards him after he was part of her family.

"Yes...unless you want to turn down the offer to stay here?" she grinned.

Draco gave a resigned sigh. "All right then."

"Good, then it's settled." Diggory clapped his hands. "I'll arrange things so that Draco can use the Floo for travel to your house." He took a little bag of Floo powder out of his pocket. Draco frowned. Apparently, it was possible for everybody to leave by Floo, but that only those allowed could arrive. "And it goes without saying that Draco's stay here should stay under wraps."

Mrs Weasley nodded, and she turned to face him after Diggory had disappeared into the fireplace. "Now you..." She couldn't finish her sentence, because he'd blown a handful of sleeping dust into her face, and she nodded off immediately and just stood there, asleep. He had to hurry, in case Charlie or George Weasley decided to call or visit, and find their mother like that.

He bounded up the stairs and knocked on the door on the second landing. "Mum?"

"Ginny, it's me, I need to talk to you. Your mum said it was okay," he said quickly.

"Go away!" Ginny snapped.

"Ginny...this is important. If we get this out of the way now, I promise I won't bother you again!"

That had done the trick. He heard Ginny get up to open the door, and he prepared himself. He blew the dust into her face as she opened the door, and once again the effect was instantaneous.

He grabbed her hand as she stood there like a sleepwalker, and pried Harry's ring off her finger. It wasn't easy, but he finally managed, and he carefully held it in his left hand. Then he took the replica out of his right pocket, and compared them...they were exactly the same! Then, carefully, so as not to mix the rings, he put the one in his left hand into the left pocket of his robes, and slid his ring on her finger instead. It briefly glowed, and then faded. She'd now obey his every whim, as if she was under the Imperius Curse. Then he grabbed the little bag with the counter agent for the powder he'd used and blew that into her face. She woke up with a start, and the hostile face took on a dreamy expression. "Hi Draco!"

Draco briefly considered taking her right there and then, but he knew it would be tempting fate. He needed to awaken Mrs Weasley as soon as possible. "Go back to whatever you've been doing, my pet!" He smirked at his own choice of words, and she complied.

Then he went back downstairs, beaming to himself. He'd rehearsed this many times in his head, as he'd met with one of his former contacts in the business of smuggling dark artefacts. It had been difficult to procure the ring and the highly illegal sleeping agent and counter agent in so little time. But he'd arranged much more in less time when he'd been planning the death of the Mudbloods. This was a piece of cake for him.

He arrived in the kitchen and took the last bit of the counter agent on his hand. Then he grabbed the bags that had contained the powders and threw them into the fire. He needed to dispose of all the evidence of course. Then he raised his hand and prepared to blow the counter agent into her face...but he changed his mind. There was something he'd always wanted to do! His future mother-in-law had lost quite a bit of weight after her no good husband died, and she now had a voluptuous bum that just invited a hearty slap, and he knew this was his only chance so he slapped her bottom fondly and chuckled. Then he blew the counter agent into her face and she woke up.

"Now you just play by the rules and I won't have to hex you into next week, are we clear?"

"Crystal!" Draco replied, before heading up to Ron's room.

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Hermione rubbed her eyes as she walked towards the mess hall, having just pulled a double shift in command. She could sense the tension within the Citadel. Harry had been lying low ever since he'd killed Vernon Dursley, and he was nowhere to be found. The people behind the attacks on April 3rd also hadn't attracted any attention to themselves and this all contributed to a growing frustration within the Citadel.

Another point of friction was the question of whether or not Harry was being controlled. Half of the Rangers believed, or were at least willing to entertain the thought that Harry was being controlled, while the other half assumed that Harry's thirst for revenge was completely his own. That division was also clearly represented in the townhouse. Gudrun had moved in when Helga had moved out to go live with Nathan so Hermione didn't know her opinion on the matter. Hermione and Galatea believed that Harry was being controlled, while Mayumi and Clara believed that he was simply on a rampage. Lilia and Gudrun, nicknamed the twins because of their very similar attitudes, couldn't care less whether or not Harry was being controlled and said that they didn't blame Harry one bit even if he had killed Dursley of his own accord. Heidi, being a typical politician, refused to take sides and negotiated an uneasy peace between the opposing camps.

She hadn't seen Max in nearly a week in now, and neither had Galatea. Apparently, he'd been training most of the time, and spent the remainder of the time in his quarters doing god knows what. Every time Hermione had gone to visit him, he'd turned her away, and she was getting a bit worried about him. He'd been like this ever since Lei's death, nearly a month ago, spending more and more time brooding over whatever information the diary contained.



To make matters worse, Hermione had noticed that he'd started to spend more and more time with Mayumi Sakai. Galatea wasn't taking it too well, because she clearly believed that Max wasn't interested in anything beyond friendship with her. Hermione wished she could reassure her friend, but she was bound by her promise to Max not to tell anybody about his feelings for Galatea.

She walked into a nearly deserted mess hall, and saw Max sitting at one of the tables by himself. She wondered why he was still awake, since it was past midnight. So after getting a chocolate covered doughnut for the sugar boost, and a cup of tea, she sat down next to him. He'd been so busy, absently toying with a small gold pendant, that he didn't even notice her approach. "Max?"

He jumped a little. "Hermione...what are you still doing up?"

She yawned. "I just pulled a double shift in C&C. What's your excuse?"

"Training...golems," came his usual short reply.

"Ah!" Hermione nodded. This conversation wasn't going anywhere, but she decided Max needed to practice his conversational skills, so she remained seated and took a good look at the pendant. It looked like a teardrop, and she thought she noticed some grooves in the side. It had to be one-half of a set. "That's a nice pendant. Did it belong to Lei? Where's the other half?"

"It belonged to my mother," he said slowly. "The other half...was taken...when my mother was killed...Master Lei couldn't save her."

"Your mother?" Hermione asked, utterly confused. Max wasn't making much sense, and she really started to worry about him.

Max didn't answer. He simply stared at the pendant, and he kept toying with it. "I was wondering what'll happen to all my money...if I'm killed in action."

Hermione frowned. That had been quite a drastic change of topic, but she was willing to encourage any conversation. "Why is that? Do you have so much money, then?"

Max nodded. "I've still got the compensation for my father and my grandfather...and with this inheritance, I don't really have to work anymore. I could quit right now...settle down...start a family," he said, looking like he didn't believe it possible himself.

"But you won't, will you?"

Max shook his head. "I'm a Ranger. My great-grandfather was a Ranger, my grandfather and my father were Rangers as well...my other grandfather is a Ranger." He locked his gaze with Hermione's. "I don't have a nationality. I was born in the Netherlands, and I lived there for a while...but I wouldn't call it home. I can't really call any of the places I've lived...home. You can call yourself an English witch...but I don't have a place I'd call home. My roots are spread all over the world...I'm not Dutch, nor American. I'm not Concordian either. But I am a Ranger."

Hermione reached over and grabbed his hand. He didn't tense anymore... he'd finally got used to Galatea and Hermione touching him. She understood what he was getting at. He identified with the Rangers, because he had nothing else. To stop being a Ranger would be to lose his identity. "But why are you so convinced that you'll die?"

"It isn't like I'm convinced...but I deem it likely."

"Don't be so pessimistic...Max," Hermione said giving his hand a little squeeze.

Max sighed. "The ranking officers have been formulating a plan to stop Harry in case it turns out he can't be brought in peacefully. A lot of factors still have to be worked out...but it boils down to this. He must be held in a spot, while everyone throws all they have at him...but someone has to hold him. Someone has to be sacrificed."

Hermione gripped his hand tighter, and a tried to swallow the lump that had been forming in her throat. "But why you?"

"I'm the best choice for the job," Max said evenly. "I have the best chance of accomplishing that task."

"There has...to be another way." Hermione struggled to utter these words as she felt a painful throb in her chest.

"This is the best way," Max said, and Hermione was surprised by the serene look on his face. It reminded her so much of the look Harry had worn before he went to face Voldemort. "A lot of lives will be saved."

A tear began to roll down her cheek as she shook her head again, and Max brushed it away.

"Don't cry..." he whispered. "This is all for the best...it's my destiny."

"You hold your destiny in your own hands, Max," Hermione sniffed.

Max managed a little smile. "That's what Master Lei always said." He paused. "Hermione...there's something I need you to know..."

Hermione's insides twisted. Why was this all so confusing? How could she have become so attached to Max in so little time. He was nearly as close to her as Ron and Harry had been. Maybe it was because he reminded her of them both in so many ways.

"Hermione...I have a twin sister out there somewhere."

That revelation hit her like a dozen stunners. "What?"

Max pulled the green diary out of the pocket of her robes. 'That's why Anastasiou wanted me so badly. Horatiu Chivu, a gifted Divinator...predicted that the mind-reader would have twin heirs. Anastasiou wanted our powers at his disposal...so I know my sister must still be alive...I can feel it. Anastasiou wouldn't have killed her. She's much too valuable to him.'

Hermione's mouth fell open. She suddenly understood what Mrs Weasley's reaction had been all about when Max mentioned that he was Elisabeth van Ketel's only child. Molly must have recognised that Elisabeth had been about to give birth to twins, judging from the size of her belly, and she must have been surprised to hear Max telling her that it hadn't been the case.

Max swallowed continued. "If I don't live through this ordeal with Harry...Could you and my grandfather try to rescue my sister for me?"

"Yes...I'll do my best!" Hermione nodded, and leaned in to kiss him on the cheek. "But you'll survive. I'm sure that Harry is being controlled, and I'm just as sure that we can break that control over him."

"Thanks," Max said, wiping away a tear forming in his own eyes. "You know what...even if I never get to meet my sister...I'll still have known a sister. You're like a little sister to me. The bratty know-it-all little sister." He put his arm around her and drew her to him.

Hermione's heart grew light and heavy at the same time as she heard his words. She rested her head on his shoulder.

\*

Ron had really enjoyed his trip in the Cruiser. He'd been really amazed at the artefacts that these Rangers seemed to have at their disposal, and a Ranger named Hwang had explained how the ship was animated. Instead of travelling to Nomad Island instantaneously...something Ron had been told the ship was capable of, they'd flown at a blistering speed of about two thousand knots, making a few stops along the way to pick up some a few other Rangers.

Five hours of the roughly ten-hour trip had been spent in a thrilling chess game against Clara, a witch from Brazil. In the end, Ron had eagerly accepted the proposal for a draw, because he'd known that that had been a match that he wouldn't have been able to win.

He'd also chatted with some of the other Rangers and realised that they'd all avoided mentioning Harry. He could feel that Harry was a sore issue for these Rangers. He'd decided not to press the issue

He'd also spend a lot of time thinking about Malfoy. Ron really didn't like the fact that Malfoy was using his family as a human shield against Harry, and he secretly hoped that his mum wouldn't consent to Draco's staying there.

Ron had made Charlie promise to drop by and check on the Burrow as much as possible, but he doubted that his older brother would check on his mother and sister as much as Ron would have. Charlie was a bit lax about those things, and Ron was sure that Charlie would start making up for lost time by bringing a lot of witches to his flat now that Ron was away. Unwilling to move back to the Burrow, Ron had moved in with Charlie after being transferred to the Office for House-elf Relocation. Charlie hadn't dared to object, partly because he'd felt a bit guilty for transferring Ron to that office, of all places, and forcing him to work with Malfoy.

As Ron disembarked, he saw that he was standing in a cavernous place, and another ship similar to the one he'd come in, standing a few dozen yards away.

"Welcome to the Citadel, Ron Weasley," a melodious voice, coming from his right, said.

Ron's breath caught in his throat as he saw the beautiful creature who'd spoken to him, and he felt his face grow hot. With slivery-white hair that reached just below her waist, a slender yet curvy figure and blue eyes that shone like opals, she was positively stunning. For some reason, she reminded him of Fleur. "Hi...are you part Veela?" he asked, kicking himself for his stupid question. It had been a very rude way to start a conversation.

But to his delight, she answered him with a smile. "In fact, I am one quarter Veela. You're very observant. My grandmother is a Veela."

"Oh! You're one quarter Veela...my sister-in-law is one quarter Veela too," Ron said, rattling on nervously. "Her name's Fleur

Delacour...d'you know her? Of course you don't...I mean, I guess it was a bit stupid of me to assume that all part Veela know each other and..."

"Fleur?" The beautiful woman started laughing. "Oh, I know Fleur! She's my cousin. I pity the man who married her. How does your brother put up with her?"

Ron's eyes widened. "You're Fleur's cousin? Didn't she invite you for their reception?" Bill and Fleur had eloped, and they had later held a reception to soothe his mother, who'd been furious. I'm sure I'd have remembered a woman like you..." He blushed as he realised that what he'd said must have sounded remarkably like a come on. "I mean..."

Fleur's cousin shook her head. "It's okay. I tend to have this effect on men" A wistful look appeared on her face. "Most men, anyway..." Then her gaze focussed on him again. "So Fleur's your sister-in-law?"

"She's not as bad as she used to be." Ron shrugged. "She and Bill are quite happy together. They've got two kids now."

The woman smiled. "Hermione's told me a lot about you and your family. But she never mentioned Fleur...I'm Galatea...Galatea Angelou!" she said brightly and stuck out her hand.

"Ron Weasley..." He blushed at his stupidity as her shook her hand. "But you already knew that," he added awkwardly.

"Don't be embarrassed. I'm used to it!" She gave him a reassuring smile. "I'll take you to your room," she said, and she led Ron to a flat circle. Ron guessed it was a levitation circle, like the one on the Cruiser...and he was proven right soon afterwards. They shot up and came to a sudden halt some ten seconds later, and he followed her down a corridor lined with doors. "Um, Galatea?" he asked cautiously, unsure as how to address her.

"Yes?" she replied, and he guessed it was okay to call her by her first name.

"I don't mean to be rude...but earlier it seemed to me that the Rangers are somehow afraid to talk about Harry."

Galatea sighed, and explained how the Order of Illumination had been divided by the question of whether or not Harry was acting of his own free will. The ones who believed he was, didn't want to waste time and risk lives by trying to bring him in alive.

"I think Harry can be redeemed," Ron said, after having digested the information.

Galatea clearly seemed surprised, but nevertheless pleased by this. "I'm sure Hermione will be happy that you feel that way." Galatea smiled. "She'll be surprised to see you."

She didn't know I was coming?"

Galatea shook her head. "She told us that if you would come, it would mean that you believed in Harry's goodness."

Ron nodded. "It took me a while, but I guess that Hermione was right all along. That's why I'm here." he smiled weakly. I guess she knows me better than I know myself!"

She showed Ron to his room and he let down his trunk. The she suggested that they'd get a midnight snack and a cup of tea before going to sleep, and Ron agreed.

"So...are you going to try to get back with Hermione...if you don't mind my asking?"

Ron was a bit confused by the question. He'd assumed that Galatea would know about Hermione's boyfriend. Maybe she wasn't as close to Hermione as he'd imagined, so he shrugged and heaved a sad sigh. "What's the use? She's got another boyfriend, hasn't she? Padma Patil told me. I ran into her at St. Mungo's in England, a couple of weeks ago. My brother's wife had had baby at about the same time as Padma's twin sister. She told me she'd seen Hermione kissing some bloke."

"Who?" Galatea nearly shouted the question, and she seemed unusually upset to Ron.

"His name's Wolfe!" Ron said gloomily. "Padma told me he's really handsome and brave."

When he didn't get a reply, he cast a sidelong glance at Galatea, and saw that she was looking quite upset now. In fact she looked just about ready to burst into tears and he wondered if he'd said anything wrong. Then his nose caught the sweet scent of pastries, and as they rounded the corner he saw the entrance to the mess hall.

He'd been quite hungry, but all his hunger disappeared as he saw it...Hermione snuggling up to a tall, dark and handsome Ranger.

Galatea uttered an anguished sound that stuck halfway between a moan and a wail, before she briskly turned around and hurried away.

Ron didn't notice. The pain in his heart fuelled his anger, making him oblivious to anything except the foremost thing on his mind. He had to get that man away from Hermione. He whipped out his wand and aimed it at the Ranger..."You bastard...Furnunculus!" he roared.

With seemingly impossible speed, the Ranger dove out of the way and pulled Hermione down with him. Within seconds, a chair came flying straight at him from across the room. Ron knew that his adversary had expected him to banish it, giving him time to fire a follow up curse while the chair was being banished. It was a very common duelling tactic, and Ron felt insulted by his opponent's assumption that he'd fall for it...as he leapt aside, keeping his eyes open and looking for that slimy, no good, girlfriend stealing git.

The bloke who'd stolen Hermione from him finally got up and faced him. "Put that wand away before you get hurt!"

This only served to infuriate Ron even more, and he positively saw red now. "Stupefy!" he roared, using his rage to put power into the spell. A sense of smug satisfaction overflowed his mind as he saw that his opponent had no chance to evade the beam, and for a



second he felt slightly disappointed for the limited duration of the duel. The fabled prowess of the Rangers was clearly overrated. But his disappointment turned to shock, as his stunner shattered on a barrier in front of the Ranger.

The Ranger blinked and shook his head a little, as if he were trying to clear it. Then he locked his gaze with Ron again. "I'll ask you again...please put that wand away. I'm running out of patience!"

"Ron!" Hermione shrieked. "What the hell do you think you're doing? Are you insane?"

Hermione's voice was like a powerful breeze that blew the red mist in his vision away. He blinked. "Hermione...I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking...I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Well, you nearly did!" Hermione screamed. "That Furnunculus could've hit me as well...if Max hadn't had the presence of mind to pull me out of harm's way. What the hell is wrong with you? You show up and you start throwing hexes. You're lucky Max didn't want to hurt you! He's one of the most powerful wizards in the world. He could take on half a dozen trained duellers!"

"I may still change my mind about not hurting him!" the Ranger grumbled darkly.

Ron glared at him. "Sorry, I guess it came as a bit of a shock to see you two sitting like that," he said through clenched teeth. "I have no excuse for my behaviour." He exhaled, releasing some of the grief, anger and frustration he was feeling and looked at Hermione. "Sorry. I knew he was your new boyfriend, but I guess I wasn't ready to see you with another man."

The angry expression on Hermione's face faded a little and was replaced by an expression of surprise and confusion. "What are you talking about? Max isn't my boyfriend. He's become quite a good friend of mine...but he isn't my boyfriend." She paused as she seemed to be searching for words. "I guess he's like an older brother to me."

"So you'd snog your brothers?" Ron replied scathingly.

"We didn't..." Hermione began, but Ron interrupted her. "Don't...just don't deny it! Padma told me she saw the two of you in an alley a couple of weeks ago," he said, forcing a smile onto his face despite feeling miserable. "No one was supposed to know about you two, right? I can tell. I already shocked someone with that bit of information without meaning to. I just assumed that she knew."

"Who...Ginny?" Hermione asked, and heaved an exasperated sigh. "Well, I'd better owl her to tell her that Padma didn't know what she was talking about..."

Ron shook his head. "Not Ginny. I didn't tell Ginny. I told Galatea...and she was really shocked too, when she saw the two of you getting cosy just now. How'd you manage to keep this a secret from your fellow Rangers anyway?"

Hermione blanched and she leaned heavily on a table. "Oh, no!" She looked at the Ranger, whose scowl had been replaced by a frown. "Max...we have to tell her!"

The Ranger shook his head. "No, it's better this way. She'll surely keep her distance now."

"What are you talking about?" Ron huffed impatiently.

"I'll explain everything to you, but I'll need you to swear that you won't get involved in any way."

Ron was completely confused. What did he mean by getting involved? "I'm listening!" Ron replied, impatiently.

The Ranger shook his head. "I need you to swear it!"

"Ro...!" Hermione had started to speak, but the Ranger snapped his fingers and Hermione was bound and gagged in the blink of an eye.

"Sorry about that," the Ranger said apologetically. "But I've learned that some drastic measures are needed to keep Hermione from

butting into a conversation, at times. Don't worry, I'll removed the bindings as soon as we're done talking!"

From the corner of his eye, Ron saw a red-faced Hermione staring daggers at the Ranger, and despite his lingering anger and resentment in the whole situation, he also found it a bit humorous, and he couldn't keep a smirk off his face. "Yeah, Hermione does tend to take over, doesn't she? All right...I swear!"

Hermione moaned into the gag, and she rolled back her eyes, shaking her head.

The Ranger grinned, and clapped his hands, and the bindings fell away.

"You've been suckered...Ron!" Hermione burst out immediately.

"Why, what do you mean?" Ron asked, feeling more stupid by the minute and realising that the Ranger had gagged Hermione because she'd been trying to warn him.

The Ranger sat down and raised his legs onto a table nonchalantly. "Yes...I did kiss Hermione, but not because I'm in love with her. Rest assured, I'm not your rival."

"So why did you kiss her?" Ron asked. He wasn't sure if he could believe this bloke.

"It was the day after the Order found out about Harry's survival...and Max had woken up from his coma. We weren't supposed to discuss Harry's survival outside the Citadel, because people might be listening," Hermione said, taking over the explanation. "I forgot about that, and I was about to talk, so Max kissed me to keep me quiet. He though someone had been following us and that it might could be a spy. Turns out it was Padma."

"I chose to kiss Hermione because we happened to be standing in Senu Alley. It's a place where Concordia's young people often go to make out. I wanted the spy to think that we just sneaked off to make out," Wolfe explained. "If I'd known it was Padma..."

"Oh I can't believe she'd spy on me like that!" Hermione huffed angrily. "She's no better than Parvati!" Hermione said, eyes narrowing. "I wonder why she told you in the first place!"

"Well, the way she told it, she hadn't been following you," Ron said, feeling that he needed to come to Padma's defense. "She caught sight of you as you entered an alley, and she hurried to catch up, which was when she saw you."

"And you believe her?" Hermione asked, looking incredulous. "She had a crush on you at Hogwarts, in our seventh year, didn't you know? She kept it well hidden, but I could tell! I think she wanted to seduce you in a moment of weakness."

Ron couldn't help himself. He blushed as the memory resurfaced in his mind.

"Well, well...Ron!" the Ranger said, with a thin smile. "Looks like your lips strayed as well!"

Ron eyes widened. "How...what...I don't know what..." His mouth snapped shut. How had that Ranger known about his kissing Padma? Ron looked at Hermione to gauge her reaction, hoping that his blush wasn't giving him away and that Hermione would fail to make the connection. But that was like hoping for Malfoy to stop being a slimy git...idle hope.

"Padma kissed you?" Hermione screamed, outraged. "That bitch! Pretending to be my friend and trying to steal my boyfriend behind my back. I'll kill her!"

"She wasn't trying to steal me away!" Ron countered. "She just felt a bit lonely...and I was heart-broken. I assumed that you'd never want me back after all the mean things I said to you. It just happened...it didn't mean anything. In fact, right after the kiss, she encouraged me to try to win you back!" he added. Then, his heart suddenly somersaulted in his chest, as he belatedly understood the implications of Hermione's words. She still thought of him as her

boyfriend...after all the nasty things he'd said and done. "Y...you still l...love me?"

"No...she meant her other boyfriend!" A soprano female voice interrupted.

"Of course she still loves you, you major league moron!" another voice said. Ron turned around and recognised the witch that had come to fetch Hermione for Harry's funeral. Next to her, stood the scary looking Gudrun with the bad attitude, and a short, scrawny and pasty-faced wizard who seemed vaguely familiar.

"How long have you three been there?" Hermione asked, blushing profusely.

"Long enough!" the black haired witch grinned. "We really enjoyed the show too...much better than those mediocre soap opera's my mother used to watch. Anyway, we were sent to investigate a Furnunculus Curse, followed by a stunner and a Shield Charm the size of Lieutenant Cliff's arse!"

"I'm guessing the shield was you...Wolfe?" The short wizard spoke, revealing a British accent and Ron remembered how he knew the wizard. He'd been Head Boy, just before Ron had started to attend Hogwarts. He'd seen Percy talk to him when they'd gone to Diagon Alley to get some school supplies for his first year.

"Yeah, the Shield Charm was mine."

"What in Njall's name happened here?" Gudrun inquired.

"Nothing. Mr Weasley and I were discussing the finer points of duelling," Wolfe said casually.

"Right!" the short wizard said, looking unconvinced, but not pressing the issue. "Use the Training Hall next time."

"We will!"

"On with the show, people." The black haired witch laughed and looked at Hermione. "I believe you were about to declare your love."

Hermione looked completely embarrassed. "Come on, Ron!" she grabbed him by the wrist. "We can't talk here."

"If you want my respect...remember your oath, Weasley!" Ranger Wolfe said. "Don't get involved...and don't let Hermione talk you into it."

Ron frowned. He'd forgotten what he'd sworn to do or not to do. In fact, Wolfe had never specified what Ron had sworn not to do.

She led him through a series of corridors, and they ended up on the battlements of the Citadel. The sight of Concordia in the distance impressed Ron tremendously, and they just stood there for a while...side by side, before Ron couldn't stand the silence anymore. "Hermione, I'm sorry for all the awful things I put you through, and that I have been too caught up in my own...self pity. I know you can't just forgive me, but I'll earn your forgiveness!"

"You need to change, Ron." Hermione nodded. "You can't keep losing control like you did when you found Max and me in the mess hall." Then she smiled warmly. "But you're here...You believe Harry can be redeemed, don't you?"

Ron returned her smile. "You were right...as usual. You were right about everything." His insides burned with guilt. This all wouldn't have happened if he hadn't condemned Harry like that. "I, Harry's best friend, said he was evil...and they all followed my lead. It's entirely my fault! If I'd just been tougher and smarter, none of this would've happened."

Hermione took his hand, and Ron felt his heart beat faster, like the first time she'd held his hand. Her other hand cupped his cheek and turned his face to hers. He was quickly losing himself in her eyes. "It isn't your fault. These things happen!" she whispered. "You can't change it, but you can remember your mistake and prevent yourself from making it again...we can prevent ourselves from making the mistakes that drove us apart."

"So are you willing to give us another try?" he asked...and held his breath.

Hermione offered him a girlishly mischievous smile and wrapped her arms around his neck. "It's good to see that a bit of the old Ron is still in there...the one too dense to see that I'm still in love with him!"

He leaned down and carefully planted a kiss on her lips at first...wanting to make sure that she was really there...that it wasn't a dream. The gentle kiss turned into a kiss bursting with the passionate urgency of lost lovers reunited, and neither had any idea how long it lasted. It took a while for Ron's mind to clear after they broke apart to breathe, but when it did he saw everything with a clarity that seemed almost alien to him. "Hermione...I want you to know that I love you more than you can imagine. We'll probably still disagree violently at times, but there's no one I rather disagree with," he said, giving her a roguish grin.

"Let's take things one step at the time, okay?" Hermione said, and kissed the tip of his nose.

"What's the first step?"

Hermione grabbed the collar of his robes and pulled him down into a kiss again, stopping only to breathe once in a while. Every time her lips left his, it felt like torture, and he nearly thought suffocating would be worth it if he could just go on kissing her forever.

They sat down on the wall, and Ron was grateful to be off his feet. The wall seemed less prone to buckling than his knees were right now.

"Hey, Hermione...what did Wolfe make me swear?"

Hermione sighed, and explained the situation between Wolfe and Galatea to Ron, and he listened patiently. When she was done, he shook his head in disbelief. "What a prat!" he winced. "But now Galatea will probably hate you because she thinks you took away her chance with him. The promise be damned. I say we tell her!"

"We can't. We promised."

"Yeah?" Ron was wracking his brain for an answer. "Well, what if we told a third person, and have that person tell her?"

"We can't!" Hermione sighed. "We promised that we wouldn't interfere in any way! He takes these things very seriously. If we break our promise, he'll lose respect for us."

"But Galatea's your friend...and now she'll hate you! How can he do this to you? Forget about him. If he wants to be alone and miserable is say we let him be. Let's just tell Galatea. I'd rather be friends with her than with Wolfe. Well, he only made you promise not to tell Galatea how he feels about her...he didn't make you promise not to tell her the truth about the kiss. He only made me promise...that sneaky bastard!"

"What's the use?" Hermione groaned. "She won't believe me."

"Offer to submit yourself to Veritaserum. That'll convince her that you're telling her the truth."

Hermione obviously wasn't thrilled by the idea, but she had the steely glint of determination in her eyes, and she nodded. "If that's what it takes...I'll do it."

"Excellent!" Ron grinned. He was rather proud of himself. If Galatea's line of questioning didn't take Hermione to Wolfe's feelings about her, there wouldn't be a problem. And if she did...well, then Wolfe couldn't really blame Hermione, because Hermione would have been compelled to tell the truth.

Now that that had been settled, he wanted to voice the question that had been nagging at the back of his mind. "Hey, Hermione?"

"Hmmm?" she mumbled lazily.

"What's up with Wolfe? He's the one who hinted at the fact that Padma and I kissed. Is he a mind-reader or something?"



"As a matter of fact, he is!" Hermione replied.

Well, that certainly explained a lot. "It was a cheap shot though...for him to rat on me like that."

"I think he was getting back at you for that surprise attack," Hermione mumbled.

Ron hugged her tighter. "Yeah...that was stupid. I wasn't thinking. I was just..."

"I know, Ron!" Hermione mumbled. "C'mon, let's go inside. I'm getting sleepy," she said, as she got up and pulled him to his feet.

"I thought you lived in Concordia now."

"I'll stay in your room."

"What happened to 'taking it slow'?" Ron teased.

"Time is a relative concept," Hermione said, giving him her most seductive smile.

"I love it when you're brainy!" Ron said, kissing her neck, and Hermione purred.

"I thought you hated it..."

"Not all the time...Mione"

"You're just saying that to argue...and don't call me Mione."

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## Corruption Exposed

### Chapter 16

Harry huddled closer to his small fire. It was a bit chilly in Australia, that time of year. He heard the cries of a Bunyip in a nearby creek and grimaced. Its presence kept wizards away, and Harry knew he'd be fine as long as the creature didn't try to chase him out of its territory. If it did, he'd have to kill it with the aid of his wand, likely alerting the Order of Illumination.

He'd Apparated to the northern regions of the continent every day nearly for two months, hunting down vampires in the search for information about the whereabouts of Athanasios Anastasiou.

He smirked. He owed the Rangers of Illumination for his success so far. They had taught him how to survive in the wilderness with minimal use of magic. They had taught him the habits of vampires, making it easier for him to find them. And it was mainly thanks to the Order of Illumination's Intelligence archives that he'd known Omar Saleh's whereabouts in the first place.

A gratified smile spread over his face. Typical...for a Death Eater to believe that he could bargain his freedom and life with a bit of information. Saleh no longer had any of the notes on Voldemort's transformation rituals...the ones Harry needed to gain the additional power to ensure that he'd successfully get his revenge. But in his pathetic attempt to save his own wretched life, the fool had revealed whom he'd given the notes to.

Harry ran his hand across his jaw. What would a vampire want with Voldemort's transformation rituals? Did he want to achieve immortality instead of the half-life he had? As far as he knew, it wasn't possible to free a vampire from his half-life...except by putting it out of his misery. He shook his head. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that he had to find Anastasiou and get those notes.

Unfortunately, he had to be very careful, for the entire wizarding world now knew that he was alive, and people were keeping their eyes open. Invisibility had never been an option. It bled off too much

magical energy, and few wizards ever mastered it. Besides, a wand had to be used in the process of turning oneself invisible, and the Rangers would immediately find him if he used his wand. Activating his Confundus Amulet wouldn't work either, because while it jammed all magical detection artefacts, the Rangers had charmed them to serve as homing beacons to their Orbital Eyes, and they'd find him immediately. He didn't know enough about Artificing to break the homing charm. He deemed it unlikely that anyone but the Artificer Rangers knew how to do that, because the security charms were too complex. Sure...Harry could overpower the charms easily, but he'd likely end up destroying the amulet if he did.

His mind wandered to the attacks on April 3rd. Even though the Rangers had been smart enough to realise that he wasn't affiliated with the culprits, many people thought he was in league with them. He'd overheard two Australian wizards talking about it when he'd stalked into Never Never, a small Australian wizarding settlement, a couple of nights ago to get some old newspapers. After all, lying low in the Australian outback didn't exactly help one keep up with the happenings in the outside world. He'd wanted to go into the settlement much sooner, but he'd decided against it. It would have been too soon after the attacks. However, as anticipated, security had slackened enough after six weeks to allow him to slip quickly in and out of the village under the cover of darkness...another thing he'd learned from his Ranger training.

He was losing patience though, and he knew he was running out of time. The longer he waited, the slimmer his chances of success would be. If he couldn't find Anastasiou, he needed to find a way to attract Anastasiou's attention. A sudden drop in the Australian vampire population would probably accomplish that, since Anastasiou fancied himself an overlord of sorts, and would come to his minions' defence, sending a team of vampiric hunters to investigate. It might also attract the attention of the Order of Illumination, but that was just a chance Harry was going to have to take. He had to hope that they wouldn't make the connection to him. If they did, he could always relocate.

He threw away the bone of the roasted kangaroo he'd had for dinner. The nights were getting longer, giving the resident vampires more

prowling time. Little did they know that they were now the prey. It was time to go hunting!

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The caress of summer sunlight streaming through the balcony door of her room gently coaxed Hermione to consciousness. She smiled happily as she felt Ron's body heat against her back, his breath lightly tickling the back of her neck, his arm draped across her body protectively. Who knew that making up could be this much fun every single time? She smiled. Maybe that was the reason for Ron's insensitive behaviour...wanting to provoke a fight only to make up afterwards.

She'd been under a lot of stress the previous week. Harry was nowhere to be found...and the rift that had formed between the Rangers over the Harry issue had grown even deeper. And when she'd come home after her haircut, Ron's remark about her looking like a badly trimmed poodle had been too much to bear. A vicious fight ensued, followed by a session of passionate making up in her bed. She'd probably have to endure a lot of teasing in the following hours, because she'd forgot to do a silencing charm around her room.

On the brighter side of things, at least Galatea had forgiven her. Hermione hadn't revealed Max's true feelings for Galatea, but she'd explained the kissing situation to her. To her great relief, Gudrun Njallsdottir, one of the few Rangers who wasn't afraid to risk igniting Max's wrath, had backed up her claim, having overheard most of the fight that had taken place in the mess hall about a month ago. Lilia and Gavin Carey had then followed her lead, and Galatea hadn't had any choice but to believe them. She'd still been a bit cool towards Hermione, but that had been more due to her disappointment at Hermione not having told her about it immediately, rather than jealousy.

Max had also let Hermione off the hook. She blushed shamefully. He'd manipulated them all like puppets. He'd known that Hermione would go to Galatea, and he'd known what Galatea's reaction would be like. Galatea now refused to speak to him, being extremely angry with him for wanting Hermione and the others to keep his deception a

secret...and that had been his aim all along. Hermione had never guessed he could be this sneaky and manipulative. He'd always seemed so straightforward and honest. Then again, his great-grandfather and mentor had been a Slytherin. Maybe Max had inherited some of his traits as well.

Still, despite her anger at having been manipulated, she couldn't help but feel sorry for him. Nobody was talking to him now, and though he seemed perfectly happy about this, Hermione knew him well enough to know that it had to be affecting him deep down. She bit her lip. He'd been doing so well...but after he'd got that blasted diary, he'd started to withdraw into himself again. It made Hermione wonder what had been written in that little green book. She was glad that he'd decided to share the secret about his sister with her...but she needed him to talk to her more. She was all he had now, because it sure seemed like Galatea was finally fed up with his antics. She'd even gone out on a date with a young mediwizard who worked at the Concordian House of Healing. But there was nothing she could do for their relationship now. Max had succeeded in driving Galatea away. She couldn't talk to Max because he'd volunteered to go on mission after mission in the past month, and all the information she got from the teams he'd been with was always the same. Brooding and withdrawn...reading the diary.

"What are you thinking about?" Ron mumbled.

Hermione tensed. Should she tell him? She spent a lot of time thinking and worrying about her brooding friend, like she'd spent a lot of time worrying about Harry at Hogwarts.

"Oh, you're thinking about Wolfe," Ron said, sounding remarkably indifferent. "I don't mind...just as long as you think about me more," he chuckled.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief and turned so she could face him and gave him her most seductive smile. "Let me show you what I've been thinking about." Once more she forgot all about doing a silencing charm.

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"Ooooooh, Ron...oooh, yes!" Hermione's Icelandic housemate immediately began to tease as they walked out of Hermione's room, and Lilia sniggered. Hermione flushed red, and Ron's face went purple.

"So, you two sure went for a wild ride, didn't you?" Lilia winked. "Giving the broomstick some exercise, eh Ron?"

"You two are just jealous!" Hermione smiled, having got over her initial embarrassment. "Come on, Ron. You'll be late for your training."

Ron had proven himself to be an able duellist in the war against Voldemort. He'd once explained to Hermione that to him, duelling was like chess, the main difference being that you were the piece on the board. They'd trained together quite a lot, and Ron became better and better. In the end, he'd proven himself to be better than many Death Eaters. Hermione wasn't sure, but she had a feeling that Ron was being evaluated for a spot in the Order. Even though he'd been no match for Max, he was better than Hermione when it came to duelling. She wasn't bad in a fight, but it wasn't really her strong point either. She was sure she'd be able to hold her own in a mission, but she'd never be able to face the overwhelming odds that the Combat Rangers often faced...and beat.

They had a quick bite to eat in the mess hall, before going down to Training Hall, where about half a dozen Rangers were working out. To her surprise, she saw Commander Ironheart standing on the sidelines, and he beckoned them over.

Hermione saluted. "Commander."

"Granger," Ironheart said, returning her salute, before extending his hand to Ron. "Welcome to the Citadel, Mr Weasley. So good to finally meet you in person...I've been trying to get hold of you to have a little chat, but I kept missing you. It wasn't that urgent anyway."

Ron frowned. "Really? What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Well, Ranger Da Silva brought your chess playing skills to my attention. I was wondering if you'd be interested in training with some Intelligence Rangers. If you can broaden the tactical insight you display in chess to suit real life situations, there might be a spot for you here in the Order."

Hermione smiled. She'd been right!

Ron's jaw fell open. "You're joking?"

Ironheart shook his head. "Had I been joking, I would have said, 'A unicorn walks into a bar and the bartender asks, why the long face'."

"Me...a Ranger?" Ron asked, incredulous.

Ironheart shrugged. "Ranger Khan told me that with a lot of hard work, you could be a decent duellist. However, we have a shortage of tacticians in Intel. You seem to have a natural aptitude for tactical thinking...but it takes a lot more than a natural aptitude. You need to develop insight into other people's minds...find out what motivated them to do what they did...what they will do next. I've heard that isn't your strongest point ...but if you can overcome that barrier, your skills would be very useful."

Ron seemed to be thinking it over. "I dunno. I don't imagine I could spend too much time in a Command Centre with a bunch of Analysts telling me how daft I am..." He smiled at Hermione.

"That won't be necessary. You could be employed in the field. Many of our tacticians happen to be hopeless in a close fight. Well, hopeless is the wrong word, but I can safely say that you're already a better fighter than most of them. Would you consider joining Captain Kovalenko for evaluation? Be warned though! A tactician's job isn't easy. You have to absorb all the information gathered by field agents and interpreted by analysts, and plan your actions accordingly. It's a very responsible task. You may not be in as much physical danger as our Combat Rangers often are...but their lives will be in your hands. The better you anticipate your opponents, the less danger the other Rangers will be in."

"I understand." Ron nodded. "I don't think I'm ready to make this decision yet. But I'd like to see if I have what it takes to be a tactician. Even if I don't, I'll probably learn a thing or two for Auror training. I've been thinking of trying out there."

Hermione frowned. This was news to her. "Ron...I didn't know you wanted to become an Auror."

"I did," Ron paused briefly, to reflect on memories that are both happy and painful to him. "Harry and I used to talk about either playing Quidditch, or becoming Aurors. He trained as an Auror, but back then I wanted to be as far away from him as possible." Ron smiled ruefully. "I'm not Oliver Wood, so I knew professional Quidditch would have to remain a boyhood dream of mine...so I did the next best thing. I studied dragons. Lots of action there!"

"So can I tell Captain Kovalenko to expect you?" Ironheart asked.

"Of course!" Ron said, beaming. "Just say when."

"I'll let you know." Ironheart nodded, and glanced at his magical wristwatch. "Well, I've got to run. I have to take over in C&C in five minutes."

Hermione beamed at Ron after Ironheart had hurried off. "Oh, Ron! This is so exciting..." she stopped as she noticed Ron's troubled expression. "What is it?"

Ron sighed. "I was just thinking...you, Harry and me all being Rangers. Then I remembered that Harry's pretty much marked for death...unless we manage to find some evidence that he's being controlled." His eyes filled up with tears a muscle near his jaw twitched as he ground his teeth. "You know...even if we do get him off the hook for those killings...his life will still be over. He'll never be trusted again. Makes me think..."

"He'd be better off dead?" Hermione said, feeling as miserable as Ron was looking. "Yeah, that crossed my mind too." she said wearily.



"At least there haven't been any more killings, and Harry's been lying low. Who knows...maybe he's already come to his senses."

"If that's true, then he must be feeling awful right now," Ron groaned. "I just...I just wish that I hadn't been such a prat to him. I don't want him to die thinking that his family hates him."

Hermione just nodded, and engulfed Ron in a hug. "We'll get through this."

"It'll be tough."

"I know. But we've been through a lot of hard times. We have to stick together."

Ron gave a small nod and mumbled. "I don't know how I've managed for so long without you. I've missed you so much."

Hermione looked into his eyes. "You're here, I'm here. The missing part is over." She examined the face of a large clock the adorned the corridor. "Come on...we'll be late for our weapons briefing."

A bit later...deep in the bowels of the Citadel, they met up with Gudrun, who'd be instructing them in the use of some weapons. She was soon joined by Helga, who was carrying a pair of capsules the size of large apples.

"These are Curse Capsules," the large woman said. "Making them is tricky, but that's not what you're here to learn. You've only got to know how to use them. They're quite easy to use!"

"First shalt thou take out thy wand, and place the Curse of thy choice into the sacred capsule....say, the Reductor. Then, shalt thou count to three, no more, no less. Three shalt be the number thou shalt count, and the number of the counting shall be three. Four shalt thou not count, nor either count thou two, excepting that thou then proceed to three. Five is right out. Once the number three, being the third number, be reached, then lobbest thou thy Curse Capsule towards thy foe, who, being naughty in thy sight, shall snuff it," Gudrun said with a steely gaze. "Any questions?"

Ron sniggered. "Nay, none."

"Good, then we'll proceed to the next weapon." Helga said, as she led Ron and Hermione into a vault where the rarest and most powerful weapons were stored. One of the lockers in the vault had been opened, showing three objects that shone with a bright light.

"These...are our Dementor slayers," Helga said, eyeing three things that looked like glass broadswords with awe and respect. "We didn't forge these. As far as we know, they already existed when the Order was formed. We only know how to work them, but no Artificer has figured out how to forge such a sword."

The awe inspired by the three shining weapons was contagious, and Hermione found herself staring at them open-mouthed. Next to her, Ron was wearing a very similar expression.

"As far as we can tell, these are the only things that can destroy Dementors and Lethifolds...besides cornering them with several Patronus Charms long enough. Each weapon houses an extremely powerful Patronus. Unfortunately, the weapons seem to be sentient. They can't be wielded by just anybody. They won't be touched by Ranger Quist, for example."

"Great...a snooty glass sword," Ron grunted.

Gudrun chuckled at his remark, but Helga gave him an admonishing look. "I'm sure there is a reason for that!"

"Yeah...well let us know when you work it out," Ron said, and looked at Gudrun. "So what other fancy weapons do you keep down here?"

"You'll find out at the crossbow range," The Icelandic witch said.

"Crossbow range?" Ron exclaimed. "You people don't lack any resources, do you? How is all this stuff paid for?"

"We can't discuss that just yet. All we can tell you is that we are partly financed by the Magical Ministries."

"Partly?" Ron asked.

Hermione nodded. "I assure you, the funds don't come out of thin air, but we don't know the specifics. You'll have to ask the Rangers who handle the finances if you want to know the exact details. But I doubt they'll tell you very much until you're formally a member of the Order."

"They must have some confidence in me, though. I reckon they wouldn't let me in here if they didn't."

"Good observation, Mr Weasley. I thought you said he was dense...Hermione," Gudrun teased.

Hermione scowled. Gudrun wasn't supposed to reveal that she discussed Ron's shortcomings behind his back. She looked at Ron apologetically.

He gave her an indulgent smile. "It's okay. I wasn't born yesterday, you know? I know that women discuss our shortcomings behind our backs."

"Really? My Nathan is clueless." Helga laughed. "He thinks he's God's gift to womankind."

"I thought his brother was the egotistical one," Hermione said. She knew Nathan to be the quieter of the fraternal twins.

Helga nodded. "Oh, he is. Matt thinks that he is a God when it comes to 'scoring with the Sheilas!'" She added the last part in a sarcastic tone.

"Wait a minute...they're brothers?" Ron blurted out, completely baffled. "Impossible. How could I have missed it?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow. How could Ron have missed it indeed? "Honestly...didn't you ask? I mean, they're both tall and Australian...and they share the same surname."

"Well, at first I did ponder the possibility that they were brothers, but then we started talking about Quidditch, and when I heard that Nathan's a Woolongong Warriors fan and Matt supports the Thundelarra Thunderers, I ruled out any possibility of their being related. I mean, the enmity between those teams is legendary!"

"I guess you were right after all, Hermione. He is rather dense!" Gudrun laughed.

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "Honestly, Ron...only you could relate family ties to Quidditch."

"Well, I didn't think it was such an unreasonable assumption," Ron muttered under his breath.

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They got to practice with some crossbows, including a large and dangerous looking one that Gudrun had affectionately nicknamed 'The Fecalator'. Apparently, she'd once made a dark wizard shit his pants, merely by pointing the weapon at him. Another spectacular weapon had been a strange sort of throwing blade...the Spinning Slayer, or Spinner for short...something that was best described as a crossing between a boomerang and a throwing blade, and it had especially fascinated Ron. It was excellent for decapitating vampires, but it was very difficult to use without injuring yourself. Hermione had once seen Max practice with one.

After practice, Ron and Hermione accompanied the two artificers to the hangar where the Cruisers were parked and underwent maintenance. A Cruiser had just touched down as they walked in, and several weary looking Rangers were disembarking. Max was among them, and he was looking terrible. He was wrapped in bandages and seemed to be limping a little. Hermione's anger was shunted aside by worry and she hurried over to him. "What happened to you?"

"Manticore," Gaal, who appeared behind him, tersely replied.

"You're a mess!"

Despite his injuries, Max managed a cocky smile. "You should see the Manticore."

He limped away and Lieutenant Gaal shook his head. "Foolish kid's taking insane risks...taking on that beast by himself. Like he doesn't give a damn about life."

"Where did you encounter that Manticore, Lieutenant?" Hermione asked.

"We got a report that Tetsuo Yamato's been spotted near his former home."

"One of the people who got freed from Azkaban?" Ron gasped.

"The same!" Gaal said darkly. "He's the most brilliant magical artefacts inventor I've ever met...smarter than I am. We apprenticed under the same teacher, before I joined the Order." The Hungarian heaved a sigh. "He'd always had this fascination for necromancy. That Manticore wasn't a live one, but a resurrected beast with all sorts of magical implants and additions. He added some sort of acid dispenser to the tail, enchanted steel claws to the front paws..." He dug into his pocket and took out a transparent pouch which contained something that looked like a magical eye. "And it had this as a visual aid. Looks like Tetsuo's up to his old tricks again."

Hermione shuddered. This sounded like it could be trouble. She knew that Horatiu Chivu was a gifted Divinator, and that Maximov had a gift with trolls...much like Quirrel had had. And then there was Lucius Malfoy...the mere thought of him bringing a bitter taste to her mouth.

"Something is brewing, but the troublemakers never stay in one place long enough for us to deal with them." Gaal sighed.

His frustration was contagious, because Hermione too felt like kicking something. "Can't we turn the tables on them? Set a trap?"

Ron shook his head. "That isn't a bad idea, but for it to work we'd have to know what their agenda is. We have to know what kind of bait

to use..." He held his breath as he seemed to realise something. "And...I think that's exactly what Wolfe is doing!" He looked at Gaal. "I assume you've had plenty of contact with the enemy, and that some of them got away."

Gaal nodded.

"What are you talking about?" Hermione frowned.

"Think about it," Ron explained. "You told me that Anastasiou is his family's personal enemy. Haven't you wondered why Wolfe's been volunteering for all these missions?" He turned to Gaal again. "Did Wolfe intentionally let some of them get away in every skirmish?"

Gaal raised his eyebrows. "Now that you mention it...yes. When it occurred I thought it was merely fatigue that caused him to be sloppy." The old Ranger eyed Ron curiously, and he looked quite impressed. "You think he let a couple of our foes get away on purpose?"

"I think he wanted some of them to survive and tell the tale of his presence," Ron admitted. "Yeah, that's my theory. He wants Anastasiou to be thinking about him. No doubt he's planning something."

Hermione was impressed and awed by Ron's reasoning...and quite proud of the insight he was showing. "How did you come up with all of this?"

"Fred used to have a saying; Trick me once, shame on you. Trick me twice, shame on me. Wolfe proved to be a sneaky strategist by setting us all up to help him push Galatea away. I'm beginning to see how he thinks. Unfortunately, his plan is flawed. I don't claim to know Anastasiou better than he does, but five-hundred-year-old vampires tend to be very patient. I'm sure he'll see through Wolfe's ploy."

"Not only that," Gaal interrupted. "Anastasiou used to be a Ranger, when he was still alive. He was an analyst. That's why he's so hard to catch. He's very clever."

"And Wolfe wants to take him on alone." Ron shook his head.

Hermione decided she had to swallow her pride and help Max before he got himself killed. He needed her friendship now, and she had to force him to open up to her once more. "Come, Ron. We have some planning to do!"

"Bout what?" Ron asked, puzzled.

"You'll see."

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They went to the medical wing, assuming that was where Wolfe had gone, only to find that Serafina Esposito had told him off and sent him on his way with some herbal painkillers. She said that too much of the magic that had healed previous injuries still lingered in his system, and that she couldn't use magic to heal him. She suggested that Hermione and Ron look for him in his quarters.

"I didn't know it was possible," Ron began pensively. "Harry got injured often enough, but Madam Pomfrey always healed him immediately."

"Well, it isn't very common but it is possible. Max gets injured every other week, on average." She shook her head. "He should've died a long time ago. Gavin Carey once calculated Max's life expectancy, taking his reckless behaviour into account."

"And?"

"Let's just say that a suicidal fruit fly has more of a life-expectancy than Max does," Hermione said delicately.

They made their way up to Max's room and Hermione pounded on the door. "Open up, Max, I need to talk to you!"

No answer came.

"Let me in! I know you're in there, I can hear your teeth grinding!"

"Maybe we ought to come back later," Ron suggested a bit apprehensively. It wasn't as if he were afraid of Wolfe, but the Ranger made him nervous. Only Hermione could worm her way into someone's life as quickly as she had with Wolfe. She was even on a first name basis with him...apparently something only Galatea had accomplished, with the exception of Wolfe's closer relatives, of course.

"Not a chance, we need to settle this now," she replied, with that glint of steely determination in her eyes.

"What do you want?" Wolfe's voice asked wearily.

"We need to talk."

"So talk!"

"We're not going to stand out here in the hall like two idiots! Let us in," Hermione said impatiently

"We?"

"Ron and I."

"Ron who?"

"Ron Weasley, you brainless git! Don't tell me that Manticore cracked your thick skull!"

Ron frowned. Hermione wasn't really being very diplomatic. Then again, maybe this was the only way to get through to Wolfe.

"Go away!" Wolfe said. He'd clearly intended to make it a command, but he sounded tired and indifferent instead.

"Max, don't make me involve Commander Ironheart in this. I'll have him order you to open the door if I have to. I don't want to treat you like a child but honestly, you're behaving like one."



That did the trick. Ron smiled as the door swung open to allow them in. Apparently Hermione really knew how to push Wolfe's buttons...to a limited extent. She still hadn't worked out a way to convince him to tell Galatea the truth. But that was his loss, because Galatea was quite a dish...He quickly cleared away those thoughts. After all, Wolfe could read minds, and he didn't want Wolfe to catch him thinking about Galatea in that context, because he noticed that the Ranger seemed to be in a really bad mood.

Instead, he surveyed the room. It was slightly larger than his own...or it seemed that way. Wolfe's bed had been suspended on four beams at a height of roughly six feet. Under it there was a chair and a desk, with the usual stuff that sat on a desk, all neatly ordered. Those were pretty much the only pieces of furniture in the room, and Ron guessed that Wolfe probably never entertained. It was a great way to save space though, and the decoration of the rest of the room seemed to hint that Wolfe spent many hours working out in his room. A punching bag hung from the ceiling, and dozens of weapons adorned the walls.

Wolfe limped over to the chair and pulled it out, gesturing Hermione to sit.

"Oh, no...you're injured...you can sit," she protested.

"It's not that bad," Wolfe grumbled, but Ron could tell this was a lie. Wolfe seemed in pain, and it looked like he was stooping because of it. Ron noticed this because they were both the same height, but Ron was clearly standing a bit taller at the moment.

"You don't have to play tough, Max," Hermione said, gently laying her hand on his shoulder. "Tell me...what's wrong? Do you want to attract Anastasiou's attention? Is that it? I heard you let some of his minions get away after every fight."

"Well, I'm impressed, little sister. You've got it all figured out." He sighed. "I guess...I had another reason, too."

"What is it...Max?" she asked.

Wolfe looked at Ron and shifted on his feet uncomfortably, and Ron knew it was time for him to leave. "I guess I'll give you some privacy..."

"No Ron, wait!" Hermione turned to Wolfe. "It was actually Ron who worked out what you were trying to do by volunteering for all those missions."

"Really?" Wolfe frowned and looked at Ron.

"Oh no you don't!" he thought, sensing what Wolfe was about to do. He wouldn't let Wolfe read his mind again just like that, so he concentrated and shivered as he conjured an image of Sybil Trelawney in lacy lingerie to his mind. If that wouldn't keep Wolfe out of his mind in the future, nothing would!

To his satisfaction, Wolfe groaned and looked away a moment later. "You need help...Weasley."

Ron shook his head and grinned at Hermione, who'd been looking at him quizzically. "I knew he'd try to read my mind, so I pictured Professor Trelawney in rather revealing lingerie and..."

Hermione burst out laughing. "S...Serves y...you right...M...Max!" she giggled, composing herself after minute or so. Then her face turned serious, and she raised her finger admonishingly. "You shouldn't abuse your powers like that, though! You really ought to respect people's privacy."

Wolfe simply shrugged. "I do my best. I was just curious how he came to that conclusion. Anyway, the other reason I'm taking all these missions is that...I..." Again he looked at Ron, expressing his desire for Ron to leave.

Then Hermione caught on. "Oooh! I told Ron about that!" she said, guiltily. "I'm sorry, but there is very little that I don't tell him. Don't worry though. He can keep a secret."

"You were hoping to find your sister?" Ron asked, catching on.

Wolfe gave a small nod.

"I see," Ron said. "Well, Hermione and I are here to tell you that you don't have to do all of this alone. In fact, you can't do all of this alone. From what I know of the Rangers of Illumination, it strikes me that they often succeed because they work together. Hermione and I have got really good at this sort of thing over the years," he added with a rueful smile, remembering how the two of them, and later Ginny as well, had always helped Harry out.

Max thought it over before giving a consenting nod. "You can help...if you want to."

"What about Galatea?" Hermione interjected.

"Galatea stays out of this!" Wolfe said adamantly.

"You could use her help too," Hermione argued.

Wolfe sighed. "I already told you why that isn't possible. Let it go!"

"Honestly...she can take care of herself!"

"I'm aware of that," Wolfe said impatiently. "But you don't know Anastasiou. He'll go after her family as well."

Ron shuddered. He'd learned that Galatea had been an early child in her parents' marriage, and that her eldest sibling would be finishing school that summer...or rather winter, since Southern Cross was in the Southern Hemisphere. She had two brothers and three sisters, the youngest being her twelve-year-old sister. Ron could see where Wolfe's concern came from, and he could relate to it. After all, his family had been high on Voldemort's hit list. "But you're forgetting that they chose to support her in her endeavour to become a Ranger," Ron pointed out. "That already puts them in some amount of danger."

"So why add to that danger?" Wolfe asked.

Ron shook his head. "That's not in your hands, and you know it...!" He'd had a very similar conversation with Harry in their fifth year.

Back then, he hadn't been able to understand Harry's motivations, and they ended up not speaking to one another for a few weeks. "Hermione, could you please step outside?"

"Why?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"Wolfe and I need to have a man-to-man talk, and you're not a man...and no, I'm not going to say anything stupid!" he said, forestalling the question that had been forming on her lips.

Wolfe eyed Ron curiously. "It's okay...little sister," Wolfe said almost good-naturedly, using the nickname that again emphasised the depth Hermione had so quickly managed to obtain in her relationship with him.

"I'll be right outside," Hermione said as she grudgingly walked out of the room, nearly slamming the door shut behind her. She hated being left out.

"So...talk!"

Ron took a deep breath. "You know...for such a fearless bloke, you show moments of remarkable cowardice." Wolfe's face darkened and Ron hastily explained. "Deep down, you know you're not just trying to protect Galatea. You're trying to save yourself the hurt you would feel if something did happen to her! But you can't rationalise your behaviour by thinking that you're doing it to protect her."

"I want her to live...I care about her," Wolfe said, a hurt expression on his face. "Is that so bad? It can't be bad."

"Oh, do you?" Ron said sceptically. "Then why do hurt her by pushing her away? You want her to live, but I don't think she wants a life without you."

"Yes she does," Wolfe said gloomily. "Gavin just told me she went out on a couple of dates with a mediwizard."

"And my sister's going to marry the slimiest git in the world in an attempt to forget Harry, who, by the way, had a big hand in starting

that whole mess by distancing himself from her because he didn't want her to get hurt. My point is, the fact that Galatea went on a couple of dates with that mediwizard doesn't mean that she doesn't love you anymore. If you don't believe me, you can ask Hermione. Okay, I'm straying from the real point I'm trying to make. I called you a coward because you're afraid to act on your feelings for Galatea, while you willingly take all those insane risks on your missions. Just tell her how you feel."

"But...what if I die? Won't she be hurt even more? And what if she dies?"

"Aha! That's the crux of the matter, isn't it?" Ron gave him a knowing smirk. This was almost exactly like Harry. "Listen, if she dies, at least she'll die happy. If you die, she'll have good things to remember you by...both options are better than what would happen if one of you were to die now. The other would be left with all sorts of 'what ifs'. You can't be afraid to live for fear of death...either your own or Galatea's. You won't have much of an existence if you do. I mean, be honest with yourself. How have you been feeling for the past month, with Galatea not talking to you?"

A couple of minutes of very awkward silence followed before Wolfe finally spoke. "You know... for someone who has the reputation of being a dense prat...you show moments of remarkable insight."

"It's all a matter of personal experience," Ron admitted seeing some truth in Max's remark. "In certain ways, you're a lot like Harry."

"Harry," Wolfe said thoughtfully. "You know...he and I nearly grew up as brothers." He pulled a little green diary out of his pocket and opened it. The page started shimmering, and Ron saw an image. "It's like a pensieve, but the memory within is interactive," Wolfe explained, "but it only comes alive at my touch." He placed his hand on Ron's shoulder. "Hang on!"

The room seemed to lurch, and the next thing he knew Ron was standing inside a room filled with Chinese decorations, and a painting of a large and fearsome-looking Chinese Fireball.

"This is what my great-grandfather's home was like, in Kowloon, at the end of the nineteenth century," Wolfe explained. "Before his parents shipped him to Britain to attend Hogwarts. That's where he met Rose McKinnon."

"Hello, Maximilian. I see you're not alone, this time." A short and stooping Chinese man walked up to them.

Wolfe nodded. "This is Ron Weasley. He's Harry Potter's best friend."

"Ah, Harry Potter...the boy who lived."

"Ron and I were talking about Harry. I told him about the plans you had for Harry."

"Ah, yes!" The small wizard nodded slowly. "Harry Potter...I heard he managed to repel a killing curse. When word reached me, I spent a year tracking down where Dumbledore had him hidden. It wasn't too difficult, after all, as Harry was not protected by the Fidelius Charm..." The old wizard shook his head. "Brilliant wizard, but far too trusting. I got the information out of the half giant easily enough...the weak link in Dumbledore's plan. All I had to do was get him drunk, and then I slipped him some Veritaserum."

"Master Lei wanted to kidnap Harry," Wolfe said, looking half-amused and half-appalled at the same time.

"Kidnapping is such a negative word," The old wizard muttered. "I merely disagreed with Dumbledore's course of action. I wanted to take Harry under my wing, and train him, as I trained Max. But the First Ranger seemed to agree with Dumbledore, and she forbade me to execute my plan. I guess the boy turned out all right after all." Master Lei shrugged. "Is that all you want to know?"

Wolfe nodded. "That is all. Until next time," he said, and then they rose out of the room and landed outside. They were back in Wolfe's room.

"Your great-grandfather was quite a piece of work," Ron said disapprovingly.

"If the rules weren't in his favour, he tended to ignore them...yes." Wolfe smirked. "I've been told that I take after him in that respect."

"Nice little diary too. Voldemort made one just like it," Ron said, examining the book warily.

Wolfe shook his head vigorously. "No. Voldemort used dark magic in his diary. In case you didn't notice, my great-grandfather's memory, while interactive, isn't sentient. It could never undertake any action on its own."

"And it doesn't suck out a person's life energy?"

"No, it doesn't," Wolfe reassured him. "It's just a fancy version of a pensieve. You know, I think I'm going to make one myself."

"Really? Why?"

"If I ever have any kids, and I die when they're too young to remember me, I want them to have something to remember me by."

"That's not a bad idea," Ron said, but it occurred to him that being able to carry their father around in their pocket wouldn't help them to move on. "But maybe that isn't such a good idea either. Harry and I ran into a Mirror of Erised in our first year at Hogwarts. Harry told me that it had been a good thing Dumbledore had talked to him about it, otherwise it might have driven him insane. He kept going back because he saw his parents and his family in the mirror."

"You think they would dwell on the past and not move on?" Wolfe frowned.

"You have been rather absorbed in this diary, haven't you?"

Wolfe's lips curved upwards. "I guess I have been turning to Master Lei for guidance more often than I should have." He closed the diary and placed it in his pocket.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but it's rather lonely out here in the corridor!" Hermione complained.

"Go on!" Wolfe nodded. "Tell Hermione I'll swing by her place in a couple of hours. I need some time for these herbs to take effect. Then we could go to the Barrel to have a drink."

"Are you buying?" Ron grinned.

Wolfe shrugged. "Why not?"

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A couple of hours later in the town house, Hermione was still utterly stunned by Ron's tale. "I can't believe he told you all that. How'd you manage to get it out of him?"

"I guess you rubbed off on me." Ron shrugged.

"You did a heck of a lot more than just rub this morning!" Lilia teased. "But seriously, Wolfe's going to admit how he feels about Galatea?"

Ron shook his head. "I didn't say that. But I guess I did succeed in making him see that he couldn't keep hurting Galatea like that."

"I'm proud of you, Ron!" Hermione beamed and leaned over to kiss him on the lips.

"Ugh, get a room!" Lilia groaned.

"Great idea!" Hermione said mischievously, and proceeded to drag Ron into her room.

While Ron was quite in the mood, a quick look at the clock told him that Wolfe would be arriving any minute now. Sure enough, someone was knocking on the heavy door downstairs, and the house-elf announced that Mr Wolfe was standing at the door.

"We've got to go. Are you coming, Lilia?" Hermione asked.



"I can't!" the Filipino witch said sadly. Ivanova's been feeling a bit under the weather. I've got a three-hour shift in half an hour. Galatea's taken over three hours too, and I'm going to relieve her now. Should I send her to the Barrel?"

"Do that...and come and look us up at the Barrel then. We'll probably still be there after your shift ends," Ron said.

"As long as you're buying!"

"Better...Wolfe is!" Ron grinned.

They decided to stroll down to the Barrel at a leisurely pace, though Ron thought they should have taken the portal. Wolfe didn't seem in pain anymore, but he was in a bit of discomfort.

Galatea appeared out of a nearby portal, still in uniform, and joined them, but she treated Wolf very coolly and barely acknowledged his presence. Wolfe hid his disappointment very well, but Ron saw a brief look of hurt flicker through his dark eyes.

On their way to the Barrel, they bumped into a tired-looking Padma Patil, who came walking out of the Concordian Chronicle building. She was probably getting off work.

"Hey Padma?" Hermione called.

Padma gave her a bland smile. "Hey!"

"I haven't heard from you in a while," she admonished.

"I've been a bit busy." Padma replied. "I...I..." A tear rolled down her cheek, and she didn't finish her sentence.

Galatea stepped in and threw her arm around Padma. Ron assumed that Galatea used her emphatic abilities when she said, "Man trouble?"

Padma sniffed and nodded.

"What kind of bastard would make you cry, Padma?" Ron said, feeling concerned. "Do you want me to beat him up?"

Galatea's eyes widened in concern. No doubt she had sensed something. "He physically harmed you! Who is it?"

"Yes, who is this guy? I'll round up some Rangers and go talk to him, before handing him over to City Watch," Ron growled.

Padma's eyes widened in fear. "No, it's nothing...stay out of this!" she said quickly.

"Come on, this is what we..." Ron started to say, but Padma's sudden fearful attitude at the mention of the Rangers made his blood run cold. He also noticed that Padma was looking at Max warily. "It was a Ranger, wasn't it!" It was more of a statement than a question.

Padma started weeping softly. "It wasn't his fault. I lead him on."

"Who is it?" Galatea asked. "This is serious. A Ranger can't behave like this. I can't believe a Ranger did this to you! You must tell us who it is! We can't have an individual like this as a member of our Order!"

"I...I can't! He said nobody would believe me anyway."

"When one of us misbehaves we take it very seriously," Wolfe grumbled. "Whether you led him on or not, he should have respected you! You need to tell me who it is..." he said, looking straight into her frightened eyes.

Padma opened her mouth..."Quist!" But it hadn't been Padma's voice that said it, but Wolfe's, and Ron realised that he must have used his gift.

"Max, where are you going?" Galatea called after him worriedly, but Wolfe didn't answer.

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"How did he do that?" Padma asked fearfully.

"Long story!" Hermione said quickly. "But it's true then? Quist did this to you?"

"Why didn't you come forward?" Galatea asked, squeezing Padma's shoulder softly.

Padma started sobbing. "He...he said he'd kill me...and that nobody would believe me anyway. He knows where Parvati and Oliver Jr live...he said he'd kill them first!"

Ron frowned as he absorbed this information. It was clear that the Order of Illumination was not without corruption, despite their best efforts to keep it pure. Anastasiou had been a Ranger, after all...and Ron had heard some stories of Rangers who had gone bad. Ron had noticed that Quist seemed a bit rude and coarse when it came to dealing with women, but Ron had never expected him to be capable of this! Then he remembered how angry Wolfe had been after he read Padma's mind, and evidently Hermione shared his concern.

"Come on! We have to go to the Citadel now!" she commanded, and started pulling Padma along with her.

"Why...what do you need me for?" Padma protested, obviously very frightened.

"You have to make a statement!" Hermione explained.

"We have to hurry!" Galatea said anxiously. "I know Max! He'll probably confront Quist and try to fight him! But he is in no shape to fight right now. Once Quist finds out that he's been exposed, there's no telling what he will do. He might kill Max."

"She's right!" Ron agreed. They had to hurry and hope that they'd get there soon enough to stop Wolfe. He'd seen Wolfe fight, and he'd heard that Wolfe was supposed to be better than Quist under normal circumstances. But as Galatea had pointed out, Wolfe's injuries gave him enough of a disadvantage...and this fight might be his last!

"Damn, why didn't I bring my emergency Portkey!" Hermione scolded herself as they hurried to the nearest portal. Hermione used a code that allowed it to open a gateway to the Citadel and the four of them quickly stepped through, ending up in the main entrance hall of the Citadel.

Three Rangers came up to them as they exited the portal. "What is the meaning of this?" a short Ranger with rather goblin-esque features asked. He pointed at Padma. "She's not allowed in here."

"Do any of you know where Max went?" Galatea asked worriedly.

"Wolfe...haven't seen him." The short Ranger shrugged. "But what...?"

"Padma's been raped, and Quist did it."

"Impossible!" another Ranger said. "A Ranger would never..."

"We can be quite certain!" Hermione said impatiently. "But we need to find Max because he went to find Quist, and I seriously doubt those two will talk it out. We have to find them before one of them ends up dead!"

"Sounds serious," the third Ranger...a willowy green-eyed witch with short blonde curls said. Ron couldn't remember her name. Astrid...something; he knew she was Norwegian.

"The Command and Control Room!" Hermione exclaimed, thinking quickly. She sprinted over to a communications mirror in a nearby wall and touched it. It shimmered to life moments later, and she called Command and Control.

A Chinese witch's face appeared in the mirror. "What is it, Granger?"

"Lieutenant Li, we've got a serious situation. We need to know the locations of Ranger Wolfe and Ranger Quist."

"What's going on?" The witch frowned.

"I don't have a lot of time to explain. It boils down to this. Ranger Quist's been accused of rape and Ranger Wolfe believed the accusation. He's on his way to confront Quist, and it could get messy!"

"Rape?"

"Lieutenant!" Hermione pleaded. "We don't have time to certify the validity of this accusation at the moment. We'll have to do that later. Right now, we need to prevent that confrontation!"

"I agree!" the witch said, and looked away from the screen. "Sweep the building for Ranger Quist and Ranger Wolfe's whereabouts!" she barked. Moments later, a really concerned look came over her features. "It seems we're too late. They're in the training hall. The door is locked with heavy sealing charms."

"I can break them!" the gobliness wizard said confidently. "Let's go!"

They rushed over to a levitation square and zoomed down to the level where the Training Hall was located. The goblin wizard immediately got to work, and muttered a series of complicated charm-diffusion incantations.

"The observation room!" Galatea said and ran through an archway a bit further down the corridor with Padma, Hermione and Ron close behind. From that room, the Training Hall could be observed through a one-way looking glass, and Ron saw that Quist and Wolfe were already circling each other, looking for an opening to attack.

Quist was a tall man, about an inch and a half taller than Ron and Wolfe, and had slightly longer limbs. That gave him the advantage of reach! Still, Ron was a bit puzzled by the fact that no wands were being used in the fight. Maybe it was a Ranger thing. "Can't we hear what they're saying?" he asked, for no sound was coming through the glass.

"Oh, of course!" Galatea said, and she flicked her wand to remove a charm that must have been blocking out the sound. They were now able to hear what the two combatants were saying.

"I can't believe you did it, Quist! You dishonoured yourself, the girl, and the Order of Illumination. I couldn't care less about your honour or the absence of it, but I take the other two personally. You've scarred her for life. You scared her to death!"

"And here you are, playing the knight in shining armour!" Quist mocked.

Wolfe didn't react to the taunt. He just glowered at Quist. "Why did you do it?"

"The little slut was asking for it. She practically threw herself at me. She chickened out when I got serious," he said, and then he lunged with a speed that Ron could hardly follow, and Wolfe barely avoided being hit. The fight looked like an ordinary martial arts fight. But it was like it was being fought at an accelerated speed, and both Wolfe and Quist leapt across the Training Hall with ease, trying to get the drop on one another. Ron knew these to be very carefully controlled levitation charms, preceded by magically enhanced jumps.

The fight continued for a good five minutes, before Quist connected with a savage kick to Wolfe's midriff, and the stricken Ranger sank to his knees and coughed up some blood, before stubbornly rising back to his feet and assuming a fighting stance once again. Then he charged Quist and the fighting continued, but Wolfe was clearly too tired and injured to fight someone as strong as Quist properly, and Wolfe staggered back as Quist's fist connected with his face. They could hear the sickening crunch all the way up in the observation room.

"I can't believe that this side of you never surfaced in your evaluations!" Wolfe growled, seemingly unconcerned by the blood that was streaming down his face. "But you won't get away with this! You won't get out of the Citadel...you can't take women against their will like that and remain unpunished."

"Just watch me do all those things...in fact, I think I'll let you do just that, after I break every bone in your body. I'll put a spell on you to keep you conscious while I get down to business! Galatea's been looking fine lately." Quist grinned evilly. "Rumour has it that she's still a virgin, and that she's been saving herself just for you! And even if she doesn't have her virginity, I'll gladly tear up the box it came in!"

Hermione and gasped at the vile choice of words, and as Ron glanced over he saw Padma wrapping her arms around herself and starting to shiver. She kept rubbing her arms, as if she were trying to wipe off some kind of taint. Then he looked at Galatea and saw that her skin had done the impossible by losing even more colour. Ron gritted his teeth. He couldn't do a thing to help Wolfe, who obviously wasn't a match for Quist in his current state.

"I...I won't let you...hurt...Galatea!" Wolfe panted. "You'll...have t...to kill...me!"

"I don't believe it. You really do love that frigid little wench, don't you?" Quist cackled. "Don't worry, I will kill you, but after you watch me kill your...!"

Wolfe's roar drowned out Quist's last words. He'd been standing about twenty feet away from Quist, but he'd crossed the distance in the fraction of a second. In fact, he moved so fast that the motion had been blurry. Quist's body shook as he took a flurry of punches to his gut before being hit by the most powerful roundhouse kick Ron had ever seen. It caused Quist to be propelled across the room as if he'd been hit by several powerful charms at the same time, and he hit the opposite wall with a meaty thud, before sinking to the floor.

Still trembling with rage, Max strode over to where he lay and hauled him to his feet. Then he reared back his fist and prepared what looked like a finishing blow.

Then the doors to the Training Hall burst open, and Commander Ironheart, Lieutenant Li, and the three Rangers they had run into earlier ran into the hall.

"Max, no!" Ironheart screamed.

Wolfe hesitated for a second before dropping Quist's limp body like a sack of potatoes. Then he took a few unsteady steps, before collapsing onto the floor himself.

Ron blinked with surprise, as he saw Galatea and Hermione rush over and kneel down beside him. He hadn't even noticed their leaving, but as he glanced to his right he saw that Padma was still there, looking pale and withdrawn, and she was still shivering. He stepped closer to throw a comforting arm around her shoulder, but she flinched and backed away from him. With a start he realised the consequences of her ordeal. It would be a very long time before she'd trust any man again. Maybe she never would! He sighed. "I know it won't be easy for you but you have to tell your story one more time. Quist practically confessed his guilt, but they'll still need your statement!"

Padma nodded and shivered some more.

"C'mon, let's get you to the medical wing!" he said, and stuck out his hand.

Padma tentatively grasped it, and Ron gingerly led her to the medical wing. She'd be looked after there, while he could sink his teeth into the question at hand. How had a beast like Quist managed to remain undiscovered? He had to find out!

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Author's Note: I'd like to thank you, oh noble readers, for helping me pass the 200-review mark. Let it also be known that I could not have done this with my beta, Anne, also known as Ashwinder. If you haven't read her stories, I strongly recommend that you do! Also, thanks Christine, for your help with this chapter, and thanks to gjege for some tips about Icelandic names.



## Potter's Folly

### Chapter 17

Anastasiou wished that his servants would bring him better meals. His latest meal had been a human filled with all sorts of toxins. Clearly, she had been addicted to all sorts of harmful drugs. These toxins couldn't harm him, of course, but they still gave the blood a bitter aftertaste that would linger for a while.

The bitter taste in his mouth was also partially due to concern about the sudden decline in the Australian vampire population. He'd sent a party out to investigate, and he'd be hearing about their findings in mere moments.

Then there was the problem with Selene. Anastasiou had sent her out on an extended mission to Romania in early autumn of 1995 to mingle with the local dark wizards and verify Voldemort's resurrection. When she returned six months later, Anastasiou had immediately noticed the changes in her scent and knew she'd been with child. She'd given birth to young Charles shortly before her twentieth birthday.

That day, he'd lost the girl he'd considered his daughter. Someone...probably the father of the child, had changed her forever. And as the years went by, Selene had started to challenge his authority more and more, up to the point where Anastasiou had had to take Charles into custody and keep him as a hostage of sorts, about a year ago. That move had certainly dragged Selene back into line, and she'd acted very sweetly towards him ever since, not even bringing up her son. But it had been just that...an act, and Anastasiou hated to have unwilling servants. They had the nasty tendency to turn on their masters at the worst possible moment.

Anastasiou absently ran his hand along his moustache and goatee. Little Charles had to be kept away from Selene, lest she do something crazy and make a run for it. He had no idea where she would run if she decided to do so. Maybe to the boy's father...but he didn't know who that wizard was, if indeed it had been a wizard...it could have been a Muggle as well. Selene had had her fair share of

both wizard and Muggle lovers ever since her fifteenth year, and she had insisted that the boy was the product of a brief fling, and that she'd forgotten everything about the father. Anastasiou didn't believe this, of course. The relationship must have been brief, but Anastasiou knew her well enough to know that she was too intelligent to allow herself to get pregnant like that, unless she'd really cared about the man. The fact that she'd never had a lover since only supported this theory. She'd wanted this man's baby!

A few minutes later, he heard the typically noisy footsteps of a human, and his doors opened to allow entry to Vlado Velkowsky, an old Macedonian wizard who was the highest ranking mortal in his organisation.

"Lord Anastasiou!" The old man croaked, as he struggled to bow deeply enough. Anastasiou was pleased by this, knowing that the wizard was willing to bow despite the discomfort he felt while doing so.

"Tell me, Vlado!"

"The Bloodhounds have lost two of their number, yet they have accomplished their objective."

Anastasiou suppressed a wince. The Bloodhounds were his best team of both wizard and vampiric operatives, and they hardly ever suffered casualties. But he was nevertheless pleased by their success.

"Harry Potter is behind the destruction of the vampire population in Australia. He deliberately did it to attract your attention."

"Did he?" Anastasiou smirked. "From this I gather he wants to talk to me about something." He looked at Vlado, expecting an answer.

"He would not say, my lord!" The wizard said, sadly. "I apologise for their failure to..."

"Don't apologise, my good man. You do not fail me often, and you haven't failed me right now. He did not reveal his reasons so as not to

weaken his bargaining position. Besides, I think I know what he might want from me."

Anastasiou started walking around in his chambers as he theorised about what Potter could be after. Revenge...a definite possibility. He'd killed the former Death Eater, Saleh, and later he'd gone after his Muggle relatives who'd abused him, succeeding in killing his uncle before the Order of Illumination had arrived to stop him.

Anastasiou had nothing to do with the Muggles, and he'd only given Voldemort minor support in the dark wizard's campaign. Moreover, Voldemort had never found out that it had been he who'd given him that support, so there was no way that Potter suspected his involvement in the war.

That only left Saleh! The wizard must have revealed something about their information exchange...information Potter wanted! It was logical to assume that Potter needed power, and lots of it! Hence Anastasiou's suspicion what Potter might be after. The transformation notes! He smiled. "I'm sure Mr Potter left some instructions regarding subsequent meetings?"

"Yes, my Lord. He suggested a certain Inuit holy place, on June 13th."

"Of course...he wants to take advantage of the long days, and put me at a great disadvantage!" Anastasiou said thoughtfully. The date was three days away. "But I'm afraid we're not going to play his little games." He turned and strode over to his desk, sitting down and writing a few quick lines on a parchment. Then he passed them to Vlado. "Hand-carry these to Tetsuo Yamato!"

The old wizard bowed again, and retreated from the chamber, leaving Anastasiou alone with his thoughts. He had to prepare for the meeting with Potter, and to do that he needed Tetsuo. The Japanese wizard had to make him a Portkey to transport Potter to a place of Anastasiou's choosing. That place had to have anti-Apparition wards, to prevent Potter from escaping. Anastasiou also needed some means of controlling Potter, since he had no reason to assume that

Potter wouldn't kill them after he got what he wanted. After all, he'd killed Saleh.

Anastasiou's train of thought was interrupted as he picked up the silent footsteps of one of the Dark Trolls. Then again, maybe there were two or three of them, stepping in sync with one another to hide their numbers to listeners. Amazing, what these beings were capable of. As the doors to his chambers opened, his suspicions turned out to be correct. There were three of them, two of them holding large scythes, and the one in front, a female, had twin weapons that looked like sickles tucked into her belt. The crescent blades were large enough to slash a human in two, and no doubt those particular blades had done so many times, for their wielder had numerous tattoos that told tales of her prowess.

"Vampire!" The female barked. "She wishes to see you!"

Anastasiou's features twisted into a sneer. The Dark Trolls didn't acknowledge his authority, as their chieftain had pledged allegiance to the Magnificent One herself! They only took orders from their chieftain, and Her, of course.

He swept past the trolls and made his way deeper into his underground fortress to his former chambers, where the Magnificent One had taken residence after he had freed her.

The heavy doors, he noticed, had been transmuted into gold, and they magically opened to admit him. As he entered, he saw that the room itself had been lavishly decorated. She had accomplished quite a lot in very little time!

He glanced and saw several Muggle paintings decorate the walls.

"Rembrandt van Rijn's Return of the Prodigal Son," he heard von Brandenburg's voice say. "It seems our lady has taken a liking to the Dutch masters!"

"So it seems!" Anastasiou nodded. "Why are you here?"

"She has given me certain assignments," the younger vampire said.

Anastasiou frowned at this. Could She be thinking of replacing him?  
"Where is the Mistress?"

A statue moved all of a sudden and started transforming. Moments later, She stood before them. "I am right here, Athanasios!" She flashed him a dazzling smile. "I have not heard from you in a while. Is everything still proceeding according to plan?"

"To say that things have not been delayed, would be a lie," he admitted. "However, I have some good news. It seems Potter wants something from me. I have begun to prepare for the meetings. One of our people will start working on means to transport Potter to a secure location and subduing him, before the day is done over. He is quite good at what he does, and I have complete confidence in him.

"What were you planning?" Von Brandenburg asked curiously.

"Our stronghold in Morocco! The Portkey would take Potter into the main pit, where we could have dozens of wands and other long-range weapons trained on him. Then will give him a collar that allows us to control him."

"An enslavement collar?" Von Brandenburg asked quizzically.

Anastasiou shook his head. "If Potter is able to resist the Imperius, he will have no problem overcoming the curse on an enslavement collar. I had something a little more lethal in mind!" He looked at the Mistress apologetically. "I have nothing further to report at the moment, my lady. And I really need to start planning our meeting with Potter."

"Very well, Athanasios." She smiled and looked at Von Brandenburg. "I want you to help him, Wilhelm, and keep me informed about your progress." She glanced at Anastasiou again and saw his expression darken slightly. "I feel no need to bother you by having you report to me personally," she explained. "I have decided to give you more independence. You work better that way, I think.

"Thank you, my Lady. Will there be anything else?"

She nodded. "I am curious about the transformation rituals used by Voldemort. Could you send me the notes?"

"As you wish, my Lady!" Anastasiou said. "I will send the notes with Wilhelm!" Then the two vampires left the room.

\*\*

"Mr Potter!" A voice echoed across the barren stretch of land Harry was standing on. Finally, they had arrived.

They were three hours late, and Harry hated to be kept waiting like this. A lone figure stood about a hundred feet away. Then there were two...three...four and in the blink of an eye he was confronted by seven hooded figures wearing brown robes. "Do you have the notes on you?" he asked impatiently.

His question was answered by mocking laughter emanating from the throats of the hooded figures. "Of course not!" the one who appeared to be the leader said. "You didn't think we'd just give you what you want without asking anything in return, did you?"

Harry chuckled confidently. "So you're here to kill me? Even the seven of you won't be able to take me!"

"We are aware of your power, and you'll be able to defeat us all. We aren't here to kill you!" another figure said. The voice sounded female. She seemed a bit taller than Harry was, but he couldn't be sure because of the distance. "We simply want you to accompany us!" She held out what looked like a bracelet. "This is a Portkey."

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Harry laughed disdainfully. "The meeting happens my way!"

"I'm afraid not!" The leader of the hooded figures spoke, as he took the bracelet from the woman. "We have the things you need to accomplish your goals, yet you have nothing to offer us...except for an alliance."

"An alliance?" Harry frowned. This didn't make too much sense to him. "Why would you want an alliance?"

"Why did you think we bothered to meet with you in the first place, Mr Potter? Why didn't we just reveal your location to the Order of Illumination, hmmm? No...Mr Potter. As I said earlier, we are aware of your power, and with you in our ranks, we'd be able to crush all who resist us. If you refuse...well, it'll take us just a bit longer to accomplish our goals. You, however, need us!"

The more Harry thought about it, the more it made sense. But he still couldn't be sure that it wasn't a trap. What if that Portkey dropped him into a volcano? Harry thought, as he watched the woman whisper something to the leader, who then gave her the bracelet. Then she strolled over to Harry casually, taking off her hood when she was about five feet away. She was indeed about an inch taller than he was, and quite attractive, with an olive complexion, beautiful features, full lips and piercing dark eyes. "Would it make you feel any better if I slipped the bracelet over both our wrists, tying us together? That way, I will Portkey in with you..." She leaned in close and whispered. "And you won't have to worry about dropping into a volcano!"

Harry couldn't quite cover his shock. How had she known...

"You're a Parselmouth...I'm a mind-reader!" she said, winking.

"Oh!" he managed to say, as he gathered his thoughts and recovered from the shock. "So you're willing to accompany me?"

"As a token of good will." She nodded. "How about it?"

Harry realised that having her bound to him would make his bargaining position stronger. He narrowed his eyes. She was a mind-reader. Surely she'd be very valuable to her master. If he took her, he'd have a bargaining chip...

Before he finished the thought, she disappeared, and re-appeared among the hooded figures. "Shame on you, Mr Potter...wanting to abduct me!" She laughed merrily. "However, the offer for any one of

them to accompany you still stands. But like you thought...I am much too valuable to my master to accompany you personally!"

As if to prove her point, the other hooded figures formed a defensive perimeter around her, and Harry groaned with frustration. He needed his revenge...and these people seemed genuine enough about granting him the possibility to exact it. He'd just have to take his chances.

"A wise decision, Mr Potter!" The woman nodded, and handed the bracelet to another robed figure, which purposefully strode over to him and slipped the bracelet over both their wrists. It was a very snug fit, and he felt numbness creeping through his fingers since the blood flow was being cut off.

"Let's get this over with!" he said irritably. The Portkey seemed to react to his very words, because an instant later he felt the familiar jerking sensation behind his navel.

The world swirled away, to be replaced by what looked like a dark dungeon, with six torches providing the only light. The dungeon had no visible entrances or exits, except a hatch in the ceiling. However, there were many narrow rectangular gaps in the walls, and Harry saw many wands at other weapons pointing at him.

The wizard next to him took off the bracelet. "I apologise for the reception, but we deemed it necessary." He shrugged. "You will find that you won't be able to Apparate out of this dungeon." Then he touched a brooch on his robes and disappeared. The brooch must have been another Portkey.

Harry snarled as his attempt to Apparate failed.

"Do calm down, Mr Potter. We mean you no harm, but this was indeed necessary. Please do not attempt to break out!" The hatch above opened, and something was dropped through it. It fell on the floor in front of him. "This is a modified enslavement collar," the voice continued. "It does not have the Imperius Curse on it, since I know you can resist that...nor does it have the Killing Curse, for you have repelled that too, once. I understand it was your mother's sacrifice



that enabled you to repel the curse, but still...I haven't acquired so much influence by taking foolish chances. Now, do us all a favour and put on the collar."

"Which curse did you put on the collar?" Harry asked, eyeing it apprehensively. He had no choice but to put the thing on. He was trapped now, and he had to ride things out until the chance to escape presented itself.

"A highly concentrated Reductor Curse, so powerful that I doubt that even you could withstand it," the voice said matter of factly. "Now please comply with my request!"

Harry smiled wryly at his mysterious captor's choice of words. Request indeed! He picked the collar up from the floor and fastened it around his neck. After he fastened it, it tightened around his neck. He examined the result by looking into a polished bronze shield that hung on one of the walls, and saw that the collar was slowly fading away. He brought his hand up to his neck, and felt that it was still there."

"A little Invisibility Charm," the voice explained. "Now, you can think about betraying me all you want!" The voice laughed. "However, the moment you're about to act on those thoughts, the collar will activate itself, leaving only bits and pieces smaller than beetle's eyes."

The hatch in the ceiling opened up once again, a struggling figure was lowered down with the use of a levitation charm. "No!" the person howled. "I've been faithful to you, Anastasiou. Don't do this to me!"

"Welcome to one of my secret fortresses, Mr Potter," the voice spoke, unperturbed by the pleas of the person who was being lowered into the dungeon. "I am Athanasios Anastasiou, and I'm sure you and I have goals in common. Please accept this as a token of good will!"

It was then that Harry recognised the person, and his anger and hatred welled up again. He was going to enjoy this tremendously!

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"That was a bloody scene." Selene muttered, looking like she was going to be sick. "The man pledged his allegiance to you! How could you sell him out like that?" she asked angrily.

"Because sooner or later, he would have done it to me!" Anastasiou explained, shaking his head at her naïveté. Selene had never been quite as ruthless as he'd liked her to be. "Lucius Malfoy would have had his uses, but I would have had to watch him all the time...alert for betrayal."

"What about Yamato, Chivu, and Maximoff?" Selene asked in a disgusted tone. "Are you going to sell them out too?"

"Maybe Maximoff. After all, it's quite clear that his gift doesn't extend to dark trolls. But Tetsuo and Horatiu have unique talents that I'd rather not lose." After all, the Seer and the Magical Artefacts inventor and part-time necromancer could further his goals a great deal. But Malfoy had just outlived his usefulness. It had been a simple matter of trading Malfoy for Potter. "Potter can further my goals better than Malfoy."

"And Draco Malfoy?"

Anastasiou sighed. Unlike his father, the young wizard still had his uses. He had never been branded a Death Eater, and therefore he enjoyed a certain amount of trust within the wizarding world, that Lucius Malfoy would never have been able to achieve again. "No, he is still useful to us. In fact, I think it is about time that we contact him with regards to his upcoming wedding."

Selene nodded, and hesitated, seemingly searching for a way to voice something on her mind. She wanted to ask about her son. He could feel it. "Charles is fine. He is being treated well, and I will let you visit him soon!"

She looked relieved and grateful. "Thank you!"

\*\*

The bitch had done it on purpose! Draco was sure of it. Every time he fell asleep, all hell broke loose in the attic. And for some reason, Silencing Charms didn't work. Draco guessed that charm must have been used so often the ceiling had to be rejecting it somehow. He took a deep breath to calm himself before he dragged himself out of bed and made his way down the narrow staircase to the bathroom where he had a quick shower. The shower wouldn't give him any warm water. Mrs Weasley had been doing her best to make his stay as unpleasant as possible ever since he moved in. No doubt she had charmed the magical shower to refuse to give Draco any warm water, and this new cold shower treatment was highly annoying.

A cold shower! Draco thought it was surely yet another hint that he ought to keep his hands off her daughter. She'd been watching him like a Kneazle, never giving him more than two minutes alone with Ginny. Even ordering Ginny to protest on his behalf hadn't worked. Still, Ginny must have been resisting the ring a little. After all, its charm was a bit weaker due to the ring's relatively small size compared to a true collar, and its maker had warned Draco that the wearer might resist some of his more extreme desires. He wondered if he ought to try and feed her some love potion to lower her inhibitions, but he decided against it as the cold water lashed his back. The risk of being caught was too great. Besides, it was only six more days until the wedding. He could wait until then!

After drying himself off, he sauntered down the stairs, where he knew he'd find Ginny cooking his breakfast for him like a good little House-elf. He'd even ordered Ginny to give him breakfast in bed once, and that had really annoyed Mrs Weasley. He never did that again though, because he later overheard a discussion between the two women where Mrs Weasley had asked Ginny why she'd brought him breakfast in bed. Apparently that wasn't typical behaviour for Ginny, and he'd chosen to stop it rather than raise Mrs Weasley's suspicions that her daughter might be under his control somehow. Actually, Molly Weasley probably did suspect something, since he'd caught her snooping through his things, no doubt looking for ingredients used in love potions. At least, he'd assumed that's what she'd been doing, because he'd seen her hastily tuck away some notes about a week ago. He went back to see what she'd been so secretive about, and had seen that his future mother-in-law had been reading up on love

potions and antidotes. Yet another reason that increased the risks of using love potions at the moment.

He descended the stairs and walked into the kitchen, noticing the penetrating scent of magical mess remover. Mrs Weasley was dressed in clothes his mother wouldn't be caught dead in, and she clutched her wand in one hand, and a cleaning rag in the other, wearing a look of nearly manic glee on her face. "I love the smell of Mrs Scower's in the morning!" she exclaimed, and took a whiff. "It smells like, victory!" Then she noticed Draco and gave him a dirty look. "Too bad Mrs Scower's can't deal with your type of stain!"

Draco just gave her his trademark superior smirk. She'd been openly challenging him for a while now, dropping all pretence of doing her best to accept him. But he couldn't care less. He intended to take Ginny as far away from her pauper relatives as possible, once they were married. He'd make a proper pureblood witch out of her!

He didn't say a word while he wolfed down his breakfast. Then, before he went to the Ministry by Floo, he kissed Ginny passionately in front of Mrs Weasley, making quite a show of feeling her daughter up. The old hag's reaction was delicious, and the dark clouds over her face brightened his day.

\*

"Good morning Master Malfoy!" Slinky the House-elf greeted him brightly, as he stumbled out of the fireplace and into his office.

"Morning." Draco replied, having to keep up the façade of actually regarding House-elves as something more than convenient slaves.

"Master Malfoy...Master Percy Weasley is wanting to talk to you. He is waiting in his office!"

"This early?" Draco frowned.

"He is not wanting to leave his office. Slinky is thinking he is going home after he is speaking with Master Draco."

Draco sighed, threw a pinch of Floo powder into the fireplace, called out his destination, and the flames roared out and took him moments later.

The trip was short, and he stepped out at the Department of International Magical Co-operation, brushing the soot off his robes. Weasley really needed to have someone clean the excess soot out of his fireplace.

Draco made his way to the Department Head's office and knocked on the door.

"Enter," Weasley's voice said, and he pushed open the door. He was genuinely surprised to see the Minister for Magic sitting in one of the armchairs, and appalled to see two Aurors. Had some of his less legal activities been discovered? He fought to keep his face impassive.

"Come in, Mr Malfoy," Diggory beckoned.

"Do the Aurors make you nervous, Malfoy?" Percy asked, watching him closely.

"Most people who've had bad experiences with Aurors have that problem!" Draco countered. "Why are they here?"

The Aurors swept him with a golden brush. It was a magical device that searched for concealed magical items...particularly spying tools.

"He's clear!" the Aurors said.

"Good." Diggory nodded. "Please cast the appropriate charm after you close the door. We'll wait for a minute before we start our meeting."

"Yes sir." The Auror nodded. "And make sure that you say everything you need to say before you open the door. The Silencio Secreto Charm will wear off when you do, and we won't be able to re-cast the spell for twelve hours."

Draco knew the Silencio Secreto Charm. It was invented by a Spanish Unspeakable in the late 1970's. It was a solid, powerful charm. It blocked people who eavesdropped outside the room, and it could block any eavesdropping charm. It couldn't block spying tools inside the particular room, however, which was why the Aurors must have swept the room, and Draco. The drawbacks were, that the Charm would end once a window or door was opened, and that two people were needed to cast it. Moreover, the Charm could only be by those people once every twelve hours.

After waiting for a minute, it was Diggory who spoke. "Mr Malfoy...Percy came to me with some concern earlier this week. He believes that his family might not be quite as safe from Harry Potter as you believe they are, and upon reflection, I am inclined to agree with him. Potter might not err...appreciate the fact that they supported Ron Weasley after the unfortunate incident three years ago. That would make them targets." Diggory got up and started pacing about. "I have managed to secure you a safe-house, so you will be moving out of the Burrow tonight. Then there is the matter of your wedding. Potter may be able to find out about it through the media. Therefore I suggest you change the location from the magical creature reservation in Somerset, to Hogwarts. The wards there will give us an additional layer of security that we couldn't otherwise provide. I have already discussed it with Minerva McGonagall. I strongly suggest you change your plans."

Draco frowned. Weasley was right! Draco had never quite looked at matters like from that perspective. Maybe he wasn't as safe at the Burrow as he'd previously imagined. Moving out of the Burrow would mean leaving Ginny alone for six whole days with her mother, who would no doubt do everything within her power to change her daughter's mind. But that was a chance he was going to have to take. He sighed. "I assume you've managed to find me some protection?"

"Three Aurors will be watching over you until your wedding day. Then...if Potter hasn't been caught yet, we'll have to find another way to protect you and Miss Weasley. Perhaps the Fidelius Charm."

"Who will be my secret keeper?"

"We don't know yet," Percy Weasley said. "But I'm thinking Hermione Granger. She's quite safe with the Order of Illumination, and she loves Ginny like a sister. I'm sure she'll do it."

"Granger?" Draco muttered thoughtfully, before nodding. "I agree."

"Then I believe we have nothing further to discuss," Diggory said, walking towards the door and opening it. "We are done here!" he said to the Aurors. "You may leave."

"Yes sir," the Aurors replied, and left.

"Oh, and Malfoy?" Percy Weasley called, as Draco was about to leave.

"What?"

"You'll be working alone today. Ms McCormack had to take the day off. Her father has fallen ill."

Draco moaned, and he mentally prepared himself for the long day as he entered his office. He nearly failed to notice a letter lying on his desk. It was an ordinary envelope, and inconspicuous. It was addressed to him, but as he examined it, he couldn't determine who had sent it to him. His father had taught him never to open mysterious letters, and he was about to toss it into the fire, in the smaller fireplace inside his office, when the envelope opened by itself and the letter came floating out, and unfolded itself in front of him.

Mr Malfoy

This letter has been charmed to open at your touch, and only you can read these words.

Draco smirked. A 'for your eyes only' charm.

If our intelligence is correct, you are alone in your office at this moment. Ms McCormack had to take the day off to visit her ill father, did she not? Amazing, what a bit of mild and completely traceless poison can accomplish.

Should you not be alone in your room, please request some privacy. Say that the letter is from your fiancée. They won't question it, since others will see the appropriately mushy text typical to such a letter, produced by an illusion charm. This would normally make it completely safe to read the letter in public. However, the letter will turn to dust after you are done reading it, and that will no doubt strike most people as odd.

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that we now control Potter. He will be attending your wedding, so we've taken the liberty of creating a Portkey for you to ensure you that you get to safety when the attack begins. It is in the envelope.

Draco looked into the envelope and saw a small silvery comb. He took it out and tucked it away in a pocket of his robes before continuing to read the letter.

The deaths will be quite deliberate, but we will make them look like collateral damage, of course. It is a pleasure to be collaborating with you, Mr Malfoy.

As he finished reading the final line, the letter turned to dust. Draco bit his lip. There was no turning back now!

\*\*

It was exactly midnight in Concordia, and Galatea and Hermione were making their way to the their town-house. Only Ron, Clara and the house-elves were there. Lilia had relieved them in the medical wing. Gudrun had been pulling double shifts all week because the Artificing Rangers were trying to finish the second battle cruiser in record time. They way things looked, they were going to need them too! Heidi had gone to Africa to settle a mining dispute between to local goblin mining clans that had escalated to unacceptable levels of violence, and the tiny Mayumi had been deployed to Japan to aid in the search for Tetsuo Yamato.

Lieutenant Montoya had made a shocking discovery a few days ago. It had complicated matters about Ranger Quist immensely. It turned



out that the Ranger had been controlled. Someone had magically inserted a second personality that functioned as a spy. Under hypnosis, the medical Rangers had been able to subdue the secondary personality long enough for the real Quist to explain to them what had happened. He didn't know who had given him that second personality, but he guessed it must have happened during his leave eleven months ago.

When Quist discovered evidence of this second personality, it had taken him over completely as a defensive measure. This had happened one month ago. From that day onwards, Quist had been unable to gain enough control to warn the Rangers in any way. The evil personality's control over those areas of his mind had been too great to overcome. Then he figured out a way to send a message indirectly. The second personality never bothered to stop any evil and aggressive actions...something he'd figured out as he'd briefly regained control of his body when destroying one of the training golems in frustration. He'd known that he'd be able to send a message to the Rangers by doing something truly appalling. He'd counted on them confronting and stopping him.

Padma had provided him with that opportunity, because they'd been on a couple of dates, and she'd been at the right place at the right time. He said he'd jumped at the chance, because the parasitic personality had been on to him and had been about to cut off that possibility too. When the deed had been done, it had tried to terrorise Padma into silence. Hermione frowned, as she remembered. And it had nearly succeeded too. If Max hadn't read her mind...

She sighed. It was also thanks to Quist that the parasitic personality hadn't killed Max, Quist had fought it from within, as much as Max had fought it on the outside. If he hadn't done so, it would have killed Max cleanly and quickly.

Then there was Padma's emotional state. Would she ever be able to forgive Quist? Hermione had told Padma about the situation, after she'd been authorised to do so, but Padma hadn't been as understanding as they'd all hoped she would be. Not that it really surprised Hermione. It was going to take a lot of time and therapy for Padma to recover from this ordeal. And Hermione hadn't even told

Padma that the rape had actually been Quist's doing. Sure, it had been the only way for him to alert the Rangers about his situation... but she doubted that Padma would ever see it that way.

Now, they had to find a way to remove the parasitic personality from Quist. This parasitic personality was nothing new. Grindelwald had used it liberally in the thirties and early forties, but no one had ever worked out how to remove those personalities without destroying the original personality along with it. Hermione took a deep breath and let it go again, clearing her mind of worries. Tomorrow was another day.

They found Ron and Clara downstairs, playing a rather difficult strategy game, and Binks was their audience. Wizard's Stratego... like the Muggle game, but the board and pieces were enchanted. Every piece had a certain value, and the higher values usually defeated the lower values. This went on until the opponent's castle was captured.

The thing Hermione liked about the game was that it was partially based on luck, giving people like her a marginal chance against people like Ron and Clara. At the outset of the game, neither opponent knew where the other had placed his or her pieces, so at times the game would be over very soon, with the less tactically gifted person being the victor.

This game had several added dimensions, however. Instead of the usual pieces, the players could choose several types of armies, each with their specialities. The main rule was that there had to be equal numbers of pieces of every value.

Ron had become hooked on the game, and he and Clara would spend every free moment playing it. Hermione shook her head. Clara's shift in C&C would start in six hours. She glanced at the game board, and it looked like Ron and Clara were about even.

"Don't you two ever get tired of that silly game?" Galatea asked.

"This game is not silly." Ron replied indignantly, not taking his eyes off the board.

Clara nodded. "It enhances one's strategic insight."

"Please!" Galatea chuckled. "In the beginning, you don't even know which pieces your opponent has. "How can there be any strategy to that?"

Clara made a move, ordering one of her pieces to reveal itself and attack.

"Hah! Flood-rock!" Ron said triumphantly as his piece revealed itself, and this being Wizard's Stratego, the relevant patch of the board actually flooded, taking several pieces off the board. Then he looked at Galatea. "Actually, it's guesswork at first, but there are several tactics that can be used to work out which pieces your opponent has, while suffering only minimal losses," he explained. "And I've found that Clara here is partial to certain game-pieces. That's why I beat her in the last three matches!" He grinned.

"Right! I'm still up by half a dozen victories," Clara pointed out.

"Yeah, but I had to work out how to play the game," Ron protested.

"Face it, Clara. You're no longer the greatest tactician in Concordia," Galatea teased. Then she yawned. "I'm going to catch some sleep. You should do the same, Clara."

"Hmmm!" The Brazilian witch replied, her brow furrowing in concentration as she surveyed the game.

"Don't keep Clara down here too long. She needs to get some sleep," Hermione said, after having watched the game for fifteen minutes. It seemed like Ron was winning now.

"Half an hour!" Ron muttered, not looking up.

Hermione bent down and kissed him goodnight. He'd probably be down there for two more hours, unless ... Well, why not? She smiled and bent down again. "Don't be too long," she whispered into his ear, and to leave no doubt in his mind what she wanted from him, she briefly tugged at his earlobe with her lips.

Ron's ears turned red. "Hermione! How d'you expect me to win with such a distraction?"

"Don't see it as distraction...see it as motivation!" Hermione winked, and walked up the stairs, heading to her room. Then she noticed Galatea, standing in the doorway to her own room, with a troubled expression on her face.

"Hermione...can I talk to you for a second?"

Hermione nodded, and Galatea stepped aside to allow Hermione into her room, closing the door behind her. Then she walked over to a large, classic four-poster, and sat down, fiddling with her night-dress

"What is it?" Hermione asked. She had a feeling it would be about Max. After his fight with Quist he'd been forced to spend a whole week in the medical wing with someone guarding him around the clock because he'd received a fairly heavy concussion in the fight. This had been necessary, because they'd had to wait for all the other healing magic to wear off before healing the injuries he'd sustained in the fight. Of course Galatea had volunteered for most of the shifts, and Hermione had noticed a subtle change in Galatea's relationship with Max after he'd been healed and released. One day later, Galatea had confirmed her suspicions. Like a teenaged girl, Galatea revealed how Max had confessed his feelings, that she and Max had kissed and that it had seemed like heaven every single time!

"Well, it's about Max..."

Hermione grinned and sat down beside her. "I thought it might be about him."

Galatea blushed. "Yes...well, Max and I...we've known each other for a long time...and I know he loves me very much...and I love him..." She blushed even more profusely.

"You want to make love to him, but you're afraid that something might go wrong?" Hermione ventured.

Galatea nodded eagerly. "Could you give me some advice?"

Hermione ran her hand through her hair and tousled it, as if it were a way to jump-start her brain again. "I'm not sure I'm the person you ought to be talking to. Ron's my first and only lover. Maybe you ought to ask Lilia. She drags a man into her room often enough."

"I can't go to Lilia for advice...Hermione, she'd tell the whole world about it!" Galatea said exasperatedly.

Hermione grinned. She had a point there. Lilia took sadistic pleasure in revealing people's embarrassing secrets. "True. How about one of the older witches then?"

"Like who?"

Hermione shrugged. "Evgenia...Serafina," she suggested

Galatea shook her head. "I'm not that close with Ranger Ivanova...and Serafina is an even bigger gossip than Lilia, even if she doesn't do it on purpose."

Another good point. Serafina Esposito was the Lavender Brown among the Rangers. She liked gossiping so much, that at times Hermione wondered whether she posed a security risk. "All right! I guess you'll just have to remember what you did last time, and guide Max through it. He's the inexperienced one, after all!"

Galatea looked at the hem of her night-dress nervously. "Actually...I've only had one boyfriend...and we never got that intimate."

Hermione's mouth fell open in surprise. "You're...you're a virgin? How come? I mean...I can't imagine that you've ever had any trouble finding men! Didn't you have any boyfriends in school? What..." She realised there was no way Galatea would get a word in if she kept up the interrogation stream, so she forced her mouth to close.

Galatea looked terribly embarrassed. "Yes...I'm nearly twenty-five...and I'm still a virgin."

"But...but, how?" Hermione continued her interrogation. "Are the rumours true then...have you been saving yourself for Max?"

"Of course not, don't be ridiculous..." Galatea began, but then she seemed to doubt her own words. "Well...maybe...partially," she then admitted. "After Max saved my life, I wasn't interested in anyone else anymore."

"But what about before you met him?"

"Well, I couldn't meet any boys at school, because Southern Cross is an all-girls school." Galatea explained.

"Right...I forgot about that!" Hermione said, remembering what she'd read in a book about all the schools around the world. Southern Cross was an all-girls school, but she hadn't made the connection in her mind when she and Galatea had exchanged information about their magical education, and Galatea hadn't mentioned it then. So that explained why Galatea had never met boys at school.

"And after Mama died... I had to take care of my brothers and sisters, because Papa took a job that required a lot of travel to support us all. Studying and taking care of my family didn't leave me much time, you know!"

Hermione nodded sympathetically. Galatea had told her about her mother's death. Unlike her older sister, who'd married a rich wizard of the Delacour family and thus had never had to work in her life, Galatea's mother hadn't used her looks to find herself a rich husband. Instead, she'd become an Auror and married a young man whom she'd been in love with...against the wishes of her family. Unfortunately, she'd got poisoned by a dark witch who'd infiltrated the French Ministry in Galatea's final year at school. Galatea had then taken care of her brothers and sisters, while her father travelled the world and earned money with some groundbreaking research, to support the lot of them. Then, after completing her mediwizardry training, the Order of Illumination had approached her, and Galatea had readily accepted their invitation. By that time, three of her siblings had started to go to school, and she'd earned enough to help her

father pay their tuition, relieving him from having to travel around the world to make enough money. He was able to stay home and look after his two youngest, who were going to school too now.

Hermione had never considered how the death of Galatea's mother had affected her life. She'd become a surrogate mother of sorts to her younger siblings...but she'd had to give up a lot that many young women took for granted. It was a miracle that she'd managed to successfully train as a mediwitch...with all those extra responsibilities. No wonder that she'd never had time to get serious with men.

"What should I do?" Galatea asked, snapping Hermione out of her thoughts.

Hermione got up and started pacing about. She had no idea how to help her friend, but she was going to try anyway. "The main thing is to make Max feel at ease. He'll probably be nervous."

Galatea nodded eagerly. "What else?"

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know. Take it slow. Be prepared to share some laughs if things don't go quite the way you expect! Hope for the best, I guess."

Galatea looked a bit disappointed. "You haven't been much help!"

"Well I never claimed to be all-knowing!" Hermione huffed, feeling slightly insulted. "I told you that someone else might have helped you more with this sort of thing."

"I'm sorry!" Galatea sighed.

"It's okay!" Hermione grinned. "So what have you got planned?"

"Max is taking me out for an evening picnic after my noon shift. Then we'd fly to the hills and look at the stars."

"How romantic!" Hermione sighed.

"Actually, we're really going to watch the stars. It's a hobby of his...and I liked Astronomy too when I was in school." Galatea added. "Something else we have in common. Would you and Ron like to come with us?"

"No thanks, I think you two need some time alone." Hermione said, shaking her head. "Besides Ron and I are leaving tomorrow. His sister is getting married this Thursday."

Galatea winced. "To the slimy git, right?"

"I see Ron told you about it." Hermione nodded. "We're all hoping for a miracle, but it looks like Ginny's really going through with it." She turned to leave. "Goodnight, Tea."

"Night, Hermione!"

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Search for the Truth.

## Chapter 18

Under different circumstances, Ron would have been glad to be home again. Not much had changed. A handful of chickens still scrounged for food in the garden, and a small legion of gnomes were either playing in the pond, or lazily basking in the sun.

Unfortunately, the reason for his presence darkened his mood. He looked at his mother, who was clutching a mug of tea nervously. "I don't know what happened, Ron."

"Okay...She was fine until Draco came along...she was just about ready to call off the wedding. She changed her mind overnight..." Ron said, summarising what his anxious mother had told him.

Molly nodded. "It's like she's under some sort of spell...I really tried everything I could think of..."

"Don't worry, Mrs Weasley." Hermione said reassuringly. "We'll find out what's wrong with her."

"But the wedding is the day after tomorrow." Molly moaned. "How are you going to manage that?"

Ron sank deeper into thought as Hermione ineffectually tried to calm his mother down. His mother was right. Ginny could be very fickle, but she would never change her mind overnight about something as important as this. Obviously, Malfoy had to be controlling her somehow. He wasn't using any of the common love potions, since Mrs Weasley had slipped Ginny several antidotes in the last couple of days, in an effort to find out what was wrong with her.

He looked up and noticed that Hermione and his mum had stopped talking. They were both sipping their tea quietly. "Hermione...is there any way to make direct contact with the Citadel?"

"Yes...why?"

"Could you call them and have someone browse through the archives to look for any means of surreptitiously controlling another person?"

Hermione looked doubtful. "I don't know...I'm only supposed to use it in an emergency."

"Don't you consider this an emergency?" Ron burst out. "My sister is about to marry an evil git, and you're worried about rules?"

"I can't abuse my connection to the Order to resolve personal matters like that!" Hermione replied hotly. "The rules are very strict in that regard."

"I'm sorry!" Ron sighed. Hermione's expression told him that his remark had hurt her, and he knew it had been a terrible thing to say. "You're right."

"Ron, did I just hear that right?" Molly Weasley gave her son a once over and smiled. "What did those Rangers do to you?" He saw that his mum was quite pleased with his attitude change, and he felt his face heat up. He shrugged.

"No, Ron....you're right." Hermione said. "Malfoy has to be controlling Ginny, and I'm sure that the archives in Citadel have the answer. But I can't just call them and ask them to help us out so we can prevent a wedding. We need more than that to get anyone in the Citadel to help us."

Ron searched his mind for an excuse he could use. What did he have on Malfoy? The memory struck like lightning. "Mum, you know about Snape's Sneakoscope...right?"

Molly nodded, but clearly didn't understand the significance of Ron's question.

"What are you talking about, Ron?" Hermione asked.

"A while ago, I asked Malfoy if he'd do his best to protect Ginny...if he'd be willing to die for her even."

Molly snorted. "That's a laugh!"

"No...I mean, yes! He said yes...but the Sneakoscope didn't react...not even the faintest whistle!"

True to form, Hermione caught on immediately. "But you told me he abandoned Ginny at the April 3rd midnight attack...so he must've been lying...but the Sneakoscope...Oh, Ron...why didn't you tell me about this sooner?"

"I was going to owl you, but then things happened and it slipped my mind," Ron said apologetically. Maybe this would be enough to get the Rangers to help them. "So, you think we'll get some help?"

Hermione looked doubtful. "I'm still not sure. I might still sound a bit crazy if I just throw this little bit in their faces without any more evidence to back it up." She sighed. "I guess I'll have to embellish things a little."

Ron wagged his eyebrows at his mother. "I'm a bad influence on her, aren't I?" He watched Hermione take a small glass circle out of her pocket as she purposefully strode over to the mirror.

"Oi...what...?" The mirror protested.

"Don't worry, this won't hurt a bit." Hermione said, as she stuck the device onto the mirror. The reflection faded, and it started to pulse with a bluish light. "This'll take about a minute...I'll explain later."

"What's that?" Molly asked.

"Not now...Mum!" Ron said. Suddenly, a round face appeared on the other side. Ron didn't know this particular Ranger very well. "Yes?"

"I'm not sure how secure this location is, or if anybody else might be listening in," Hermione said. "Is it possible to meet another operative face to face in a secure area?"

Ron knew this was procedure. Hermione couldn't just blurt out anything she wanted to say. In fact, she may already have broken a rule by using that little glass circle trinket in front of his mother.

The Ranger frowned for a moment. "Your location?"

"The Burrow...a wizarding house just outside..."

"Ottery St. Catchpole..." the Ranger finished. He frowned. "There are some fairly heavy wards in place," he said, as he looked away, seeming to listen to what someone else was saying. Then he looked back at Hermione. "And you say that location isn't secure?"

"I have my reasons," Hermione said defiantly.

"Very well!" The Ranger nodded. "Someone will be along shortly. We'll let you know where and how you can meet."

"I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"You'd better be!" the Ranger grumbled. "Out!"

"Not very polite, is he?" Molly frowned, after the Ranger's face had disappeared.

"That's just his attitude. If you think I'm a by-the-book person, you ought to get a load of him!" Hermione laughed.

"So how will you know where to rendezvous?" Ron asked.

"The Rangers have their ways," she said mysteriously, and got up. "Come on, we've got some time to kill. I'll show you an advanced detection spell that'll allow us to find listening devices."

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They combed the Burrow for two hours, and to Hermione's relief they didn't find any listening devices. It was a good thing too, because if there had been such a device, it could have meant that Draco was on to them, and that all their hopes of bringing the matter to a happy

ending would be lost. She knew she should have performed this task upon arrival at the Burrow, but there was no use in worrying about it anymore. "All right, at least I can be fairly certain that no one is listening in now."

"Now can you tell me what you did to my mirror?" Molly asked impatiently.

"Oh, I temporarily transformed it into a communications mirror," Hermione explained. "It was the only way to talk to the Rangers. In Concordia, mirrors are used instead of a Floo connection for communication."

"So how will we meet with them?" Ron asked.

"I think I ought to go alone," Hermione said. "After all, even though it's almost certain that you're going to be asked to join the Order...they haven't extended the invitation yet."

Molly clapped her hands delightedly. "Ronald...a Ranger? Oh, wait until I tell the Lovegoods and the Fawcetts!"

"I'd advise against spreading the word, Mrs Weasley," Hermione said sternly. "Most small time fiends are actually afraid to harm the families of Rangers...but to the nastiest of the lot it just makes them targets." Then her face softened and she beamed at Ron. "But I'm proud of him too!" She felt something vibrating in her pocket. She dug into her pocket and pulled out the crystal disk that also functioned as a portable communicator. Tiny letters seemed to reflect a sentence.

Proceed to the paddock behind the house.

"I've got to go," she said, and she walked out of the kitchen, heading towards the paddock. After she'd entered, a new simple sentence appeared.

The Portkey is an old fishing boot.

She briefly searched, and surely enough, it was there. The moment she closed her fist around it, she felt the telltale jerk behind her navel, and she was transported away.

She landed on a stone surface in a gloomy looking room with only a skylight providing faint illumination. She waited for about half a minute...no doubt they were making sure she was really who she said she was. Then door swung open, and Hermione was surprised to see Otomalesau Tima, the same round-faced Ranger she'd spoken to earlier. "Follow me!"

"Where are we?" Hermione couldn't help but ask.

"That's on a need-to-know basis...you don't."

"What are you doing here? Why is Command sending out analysts?"

"I do field duty from time to time, if you must know," the Samoan wizard replied gruffly.

They walked through some corridors and reached a small conference room. Gudrun was sitting at the table, smoking a cigarette. "Ah, Dark Mistress Nicotine...once again I suckle at your smoky teat!" she muttered, after taking a deep drag and blowing smoke rings.

"Gudrun!" Tima barked.

"What do you want, you moon-faced assassin of joy?" Gudrun said, unimpressed and unconcerned by his tone.

"Put that cigarette out," he said, marching up to her. "You're not allowed to smoke on duty. Furthermore, it's a disgusting habit and..."

Gudrun took another deep drag and blew the smoke into Tima's face, shutting him up. Then she looked at Hermione. "So what's the emergency?"

"I've recognised several signs that a certain individual possesses illegal artefacts...Tau Class, I think. A witness states that a highly sensitive Sneakoscope failed to react to a statement that was known

to be a lie," she said, doing her best to keep her face straight. To her dismay, something in the room whistled in alarm.

Gudrun raised her eyebrows and felt around in her robes, pulling out a Sneakoscope. "Oh, I thought I lost it. Looks like it was in my robes the whole time." She laughed. "Tough luck, Hermione."

"Granger!" Tima barked. "Why the falsehood?"

Gudrun just laughed some more. "Relax, Tima," she said, soothing the strict wizard, before turning her attention back towards Hermione. "Okay, you were telling the truth about your suspicions, but the rest was bull!"

Hermione would have given anything to evaporate on the spot... getting caught red-handed was terribly embarrassing. She hadn't felt this bad since Professor McGonagall had caught her and Harry after they'd smuggled Norbert out of Hogwarts. "Sorry!" she squeaked

"That's okay...d'you think your the first rookie to try and pull this stunt on us?" Gudrun smirked. "Don't pay any attention to Tima, though. Tau Class, you said?"

Hermione nodded. "The witness...Ron...said that he was almost sure that the individual was lying."

"Almost?" Gudrun frowned. Hermione proceeded to explain what had happened, and Gudrun took a moment to process the information before she spoke. "Well, if that was the case...the Sneakoscope should have reacted. I don't know about a Confundus Amulet...Though as far as I know...we're the only ones who have them. But I think this warrants a closer investigation. Especially if he's Lucius Malfoy's son."

"I agree." Tima nodded. "I will contact Lieutenant Gaal."

"There's something else," Hermione said, after Tima had stalked off. Being an Artificer, Gudrun was likely to have an answer for her. "Could you find out which means can be used to control another

person's mind...without the use of the Imperius or any kind of potion?"

Gudrun took one final drag of her cigarette, before conjuring up an ashtray to extinguish it. Then she flicked her wand, and the ashtray and extinguished cigarette disappeared. "Hmmm, the first thing that comes to mind is an Enslavement Collar. Why?"

"Ron's sister is marrying Draco Malfoy the day after tomorrow. Her mum says that she'd been planning to cancel the wedding because she knew she didn't really love him. But then Malfoy showed up to stay at their house. Next morning, she was completely in love with him. Her mum tried several antidotes for love potions, but nothing worked. And the Ministry would've known if he'd used the Imperius Curse, so we've ruled out that possibility too."

"Suspicious!" Gudrun agreed. "I'm definitely thinking Enslavement Collar. But those things aren't easy to smuggle without being caught. However...if he does have a Confundus Amulet, or something similar, it's likely that he'd be able to get an Enslavement Collar."

"What do these collars look like?" Hermione asked. She needed to know what to be on the lookout for.

"Well they're called collars, but they're usually inconspicuous things one can wear, like bracelets...necklaces, stuff like that."

"Got it...inconspicuous stuff," Hermione repeated. "So how long do I have to stay here? Where are we anyway?"

"Didn't Tima tell you?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Don't tell me he pulled that need-to-know line on you...it isn't like this place is top secret, anyway."

Hermione blushed and nodded...feeling incredibly stupid. "Is this one of the regional Ranger stations?"



"Right in one." Gudrun nodded. "Ireland."

"So it's just you and Tima?" Hermione asked, knowing that it was standard procedure for two Rangers to be present at all times.

"Actually, it was just Tima, before I got here...you know, since we're a bit understaffed right now with almost everybody looking for Harry and those Azkaban escapees. Gavin and Mayumi just got transferred from Japan...they ought to arrive any minute now. Command decided to put two extra people here, in case Harry decides to pay Britain another visit." Gudrun paused and pulled a packet of chewing gum out of one of the many pockets of her robes. "I'm trying to quit...just don't tell Tima I'm actually listening to his advice!"

Tima returned a few minutes later. "Guess what? It looks like your hunch means something. I talked to Lieutenant Gaal. He said that he and Tetsuo Yamato had developed a prototype of a Confundus Amulet or Talisman, before he joined the Order. So Yamato knows how to make them. Furthermore, it seems that Lucius Malfoy had a number of dealings with Yamato in the past. He said he wouldn't be surprised if Lucius Malfoy had bought an Amulet, and passed it to his son."

"Or maybe Draco just stole it from his father!" Hermione said scathingly. "I wouldn't put it beyond him."

"Either way, Command has decided that this is worth an investigation. Lieutenant Gaal will contact us in three hours to give you more instructions."

"Three hours?" Hermione didn't want to complain, given the seriousness of the situation, but three hours was a longer than she'd expected to be away. She yawned, having been awake for nearly 24 hours, because Ron hadn't let her get much sleep the night before they'd travelled back to England. That, coupled with the fact that she had to do the packing for both of them, meant that she was dead tired now. "Is there any place where I can take a nap?"

"Out of the second door into the corridor...third door on the left." Gudrun said. "You can sleep on one of top bunks."

Hermione nodded her thanks and headed to the small room, and something silvery caught her attention. It was an invisibility cloak, probably Tima's, since it was unlikely that a Muggle-born like Gudrun owned one. Not being able to help herself, she threw the cloak over her shoulders, and giggled as she looked in the mirror at her disembodied head. Then she pulled the cloak over her head, disappearing from the mirror completely.

She heard voices outside in the corridor, and smiling, she withdrew into a corner of the room. She recognised the voices of Gavin Carey and Mayumi Sakai, and moments later the two small wizards came into the room. At a distance, Mayumi could easily be mistaken for a young girl, but close up it would become apparent that she was an adult, be it a miniature woman at four feet and eleven inches. Gavin, for his part, looked like he'd stopped growing in his early teens. He was only five feet and three and a half inches tall.

"So it meant nothing to you?"

Mayumi rolled up her eyes and heaved an exasperated sigh. "Gavin, I had too much to drink! We had a moment...let's leave it at that!"

Hermione felt her face heat up in shame. She definitely didn't want to hear this, but she didn't have the heart to reveal herself anymore. It would be too embarrassing.

"I don't believe that!" Gavin shook his head and took a deep breath. It looked like he was gathering up his courage. "Mayumi...I..."

"Don't say it!" The Japanese witch hissed. "Get over it!"

"But..."

"Nothing! Gavin...you've been my friend ever since I joined the Order. You know what type of men I like, and you simply don't fall under that category. Now don't go thinking that you're in love with me just because of a mistake. That's so juvenile."

"It wasn't a mistake. Mayumi, I'm not stupid. You may have had a little too much to drink, but you were in complete control of your actions!"

"What if I was?" Mayumi said icily.

Gavin's eyes widened like saucers. "Y...you used me?" he sputtered. "You knew how I felt about you!" Mayumi started to protest, but Gavin cut her off. "Don't you dare deny it! I've liked you ever since you first came to the Citadel. Don't tell me that you didn't notice that I always came running like an idiot whenever you needed a favour." He shook his head. "Don't worry...I know you didn't ask for me to fall in love with you. That's my own damned fault. But the fact remains that you used me because of it. You settled for me okay when your tall and handsome type of man wasn't around, and now you're just going to throw me away!"

"You are out of line!" Mayumi yelled shrilly. "Apologise!"

Gavin's face hardened. "All right. I'm sorry...I'm sorry that I was stupid enough to worship the ground you walked on...I'm sorry that I was blinded by your pretence of friendship. Yes, pretence...of friendship, because now I know that you just kept me around for your convenience. And I'm also sorry that it took me this long to see you for what you are...a pretentious and manipulative bitch!"

He strode out, leaving a stunned Mayumi behind.

Hermione didn't even dare to breathe, afraid that Mayumi would hear her now that everything had gone quiet. On the other hand, she was also bursting to give the Japanese witch a piece of her mind. She knew that Mayumi wasn't to blame for Gavin's feelings, but she shouldn't have strung him along like that.

She remained in that corner, trying not to make a sound as Mayumi silently unpacked her bag. She only noticed that Mayumi had been crying after she heard a small sob and saw the little witch wipe away a tear with the back of her hand. When she finally left the room, she seemingly dragged her feet as she walked. No doubt because she

doesn't want to face Gavin. Hermione thought, annoyed at Mayumi's display of self-pity.

If anyone deserved pity it was Gavin. He'd been over to the town house many times, at times to drop things off for Mayumi, and other times to take her out into the city. His devotion had always been obvious to Hermione, and she couldn't imagine that Mayumi hadn't noticed. She'd probably pretended not to notice to avoid having to deal with it, and Hermione could understand that. She knew what it was like to have a man crushing on her while she didn't feel the same way.

Hermione threw off the invisibility cloak and climbed onto one of the beds, lying there and forcing herself to sleep. But the conversation between Mayumi and Gavin haunted her, and prevented her from getting any sleep. She knew she was going to be a wreck by the time she got back to the Burrow.

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Ron knew better than to wait around for Hermione. She'd come and find him as soon as she had more information, so after Ginny got home two and a half hours later, Ron Apparated to Charlie's flat in London upon his mother's request. She believed that Charlie would forget the get-together at George's.

Charlie kept a large and empty walk-in closet that was used especially for the purpose of Apparition since he had some Muggle acquaintances, and one never knew when they might be visiting. So to keep his relatives and friends from Apparating into his living room and scaring the living daylights out of Muggles, he used the closet as a safe Apparition point. Upon arrival, Ron always listened to see if anyone was home or if Charlie was alone, and this time he wasn't.

"For the last time...who is she?" Ron heard an angry female voice scream. One of Charlie's acquaintances was visiting.

"Who's who, dear?" Charlie asked innocently, but the tremble in his older brother's voice told him that Charlie was lying through his teeth.

"Arrgh!" the woman screamed, and Ron heard someone stomping away before the door slammed shut loudly.

"Bugger," Charlie said, and Ron deemed it safe to come out.

"Oi, Charlie. What was that all about?" he called out.

"When did you get here?" Charlie asked, rounding the corner. Ron saw he was wearing nothing but a towel.

"In time to hear...For the last time, who is she?" Ron grinned. "What happened anyway?"

"A case of mistaken identity," Charlie mumbled, his ears burning red.

"What?" Ron frowned, having no idea what his older brother was talking about.

Charlie sighed. "Ah, ickle and innocent Ronniekins," Charlie chuckled. "If you see a different woman every so often...there are certain risks, and..."

"Of course, Mum's told me all about that!" Ron rolled his eyes...after all, he wasn't a complete dimwit.

Charlie laughed. "Ah...no, that's not what I'm talking about. I mean that it's hard to keep the women apart some times. And if you call them by the wrong name in a moment of passion," he grimaced. "Let's just say that it destroys the mood."

Ron caught on and started laughing. Saying that it just destroyed the mood was a gross understatement. "Charlie, how can you be such a prat?"

"Oh, shut up," Charlie huffed. "Hermione's the only woman you've been with, so you can't have that problem, now can you?"

"Really...and how many have you been with then, lover boy?" Ron asked.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Charlie said. "It isn't something to boast about anyway. I'm not really happy with the way things are."

"How are things, then?" Ron asked, noticing the sad look on Charlie's face.

Charlie ran his hand through his tousled red hair as he thought of a way to explain it. "Imagine your life without Hermione," he finally said. "Terrible, isn't it?"

Ron shrugged, not completely succeeding with the visualisation. "I reckon you're right. But how can you miss someone you've never met before?"

'That's just the thing...I think I've met her...but I let her get away," Charlie said dejectedly. "Her name keeps haunting me, and I keep calling other women by her name. That's the third woman I chased away like that, you know?"

"Bummer." Ron said. "Lavender Brown would say it was a sign... you know... the memory of the true love chasing away all the other lovers!" he winked and imitated Professor Trelawney's voice.

"Yeah, well I reckon she'd have a good point," Charlie mumbled and then abruptly changed the subject. "Tea?"

"At George's," Ron said. "I actually came to remind you."

"Blimey...I forgot all about that!" Charlie exclaimed. "When are we supposed to be there?"

Ron checked his watch. "You've got about half an hour."

Charlie swore and darted into the bathroom for a quick shower. He was done showering five minutes later, but it took him fifteen minutes to find some decent, clean robes, and Ron shook his head. The bachelor's life definitely didn't agree with Charlie.

They'd travelled to Weasley's Warren by Floo powder with only five minutes to spare, and found the other Weasleys there already. Arthur,

Millie, Susie and Fred ran up to them immediately, while Amelie, Bill's eldest girl, hung back, since she didn't know Ron and Charlie very well.

Dragging along Susie and Millie, who were each clinging to a leg, Ron greeted his brothers. "Where are the wives?" he asked, shaking George's hand.

"Off changing diapers." George grinned. "Angelina reckons the Weasley babies challenged each other to a dung contest, because they've been at it for two hours now. Everyone's had a turn with changing them...and guess what? The unmarried uncles are up next."

Ron grimaced. "And if I refuse?"

"I'll just tell Susie and Millie that their favourite Uncle Ron wouldn't mind if they played pranks on him."

"All right!" Ron threw up his hands in surrender. "Have mercy!"

"Don't know the meaning of the word." George grinned. "Where's Hermione?"

Ron glanced at Ginny, who was happily chatting away with their mother, whose sad look suggested she'd be attending a funeral instead of a wedding the day after tomorrow. "Hermione's looking for a miracle."

"What are you talking about?"

Ron dragged Charlie out of the spacious living room and guided him to a library so that they could talk privately. "Err, I don't know if this place is safe..." Ron began.

"Quit it already." George grinned. "You're acting like Moody. Why wouldn't we be safe, here?"

"You don't know how many ways there are to eavesdrop!" Ron said. He'd learned a lot about that at the Citadel.

"Who'd want to eavesdrop on me?" George said, shaking his head.

"Dunno." Ron shrugged. "Maybe corporate espionage."

"I don't think so. With the house-elves to take care of the kids I don't do any of my inventing at home anymore."

Ron saw that he was being too paranoid, and sighed. He started pacing around "Okay, here's the story." He once again told the story, while George listened and nodded, looking very interested. "So Hermione went to meet with some Rangers today. She reckons they can help us to work out how Malfoy managed to avoid detection."

"Assuming that he was lying," George added.

"Yeah! But do you really think he wasn't? This is Malfoy we're talking about here."

"Yeah, but he's supposed to have changed..." George smoothed the moustache and goatee. "Are you sure she'll find something?"

"I'm not sure. I hope she will, though," Ron said, just as a red-faced Charlie walked in. "What's up with you?"

"I...ah...went to say hello to the girls. They were done changing the kids. They were ah...n...nursing!" Charlie stammered. Then he shook his head. "This really isn't my day."

George roared with laughter. "You got an eyeful, didn't you? Don't worry though, I'm sure they're not bothered by it. It's only natural, after all."

The girl probably didn't mind, but Ron certainly understood Charlie's embarrassment about walking in on his brothers' wives like that. It was a childless man's perspective... something his other brothers had irrevocably lost forever.



"Charlie? Eez everything okay?" Fleur asked, as she swept into the library. Ron hadn't seen her in a while, and noticed that she'd filled out in places that were to be expected of a recent mother. But she still managed to look good, and Ron felt his face warm up.

"Hi, Fleur!"

"Ello, Ron!" Fleur offered him a dazzling smile and kissed him on either cheek, which only aggravated his blush. He knew that Hermione would be furious if she'd been there. She'd have no reason to be, of course, but Ron knew the feeling of unease at seeing an attractive man paying Hermione attention all too well. So he really couldn't have blamed her in such a case. To Ron's satisfaction, Charlie hadn't been immune to Fleur's charm either, and to Ron's further satisfaction his older brother's blush rivalled his own.

"I 'ope we 'ave not embarrassed you?"

Charlie grinned. "Nah...I just embarrassed myself...you girls had nothing to do with it."

"Molly told me that you 'ave become a Ranger...Ron?" Fleur frowned.

Charlie looked at Ron questioningly. "And when were you going to tell me this?"

"I'm not a Ranger...and I haven't been asked to join the Order...formally. Mum's just getting ahead of herself," Ron said.

"But you've been asked informally?" George asked.

Ron nodded and grinned, not being able to help himself. It was a flattering thought.

"I 'ave a cousin who is a Ranger." Fleur mentioned.

"Galatea...I've met her," Ron confirmed. "Nice lady."

"So our Ronniekins is a great enough wizard to become a Ranger." Charlie grinned.

"It isn't like that," Ron corrected. "They're just people, like you and me. True, some of them are extremely powerful," he added, thinking of Wolfe. "But they're not selected for their power alone. They're just a people who do their best to keep the rest of the world safe, and if peace could be measured in percentages, I'd say that eighty percent of the peace we have now has been bought with their blood. There are things going on out there, Charlie. Threats that the world never hears about because the Rangers stop them."

"Sounds dangerous," George said. "Are you sure you want to become a Ranger?"

Ron looked out of a large window. Millie, Susie and Fred were in a huddle, casting glances at Arthur, who patiently allowed Amelie to stick flowers in his hair. They were probably planning some sort of prank, and a stern looking house-elf whose expression reminded Ron of McGonagall, kept a close eye on them, ready to intervene on Arthur's behalf. Ron smiled. Arthur's behaviour was so good that it almost seemed as if he were compensating for the deviousness of his little brother and cousins. He was the Percy of the youngest Weasley generation.

"Oi Ron...you still with us?" George called, waving his hand in front of Ron's face and dragging him back to reality.

"I was just thinking. They're so carefree." Ron muttered.

Percy, who'd caught those words as he walked in. and recognised Ron's wistful expression, nodded sympathetically. "As all children should be. I remember back in my day, when Voldemort was on the rise...it was a nightmare. The grownups were terrified, and we children felt it. I'm glad they don't have to live like that."

"Which is why I'll accept the invitation to the Order, if I'm asked...no matter how dangerous it is. I want to spare them from ever going through what we went through."

"Our Ronniekins has sure grown up, hasn't he?" George said, trying to lighten the mood.

"E would 'ave had to, eventually." Fleur agreed, flashing him a warm smile.

"E would 'ave had to do what, dear?" Bill asked, hugging his wife from behind while he imitated her imperfect English. Ron knew that she had done her best to improve her English, and she had improved a little, but it was still far from perfect, and Bill delighted in teasing his wife about it.

"In memory of Madam Pince, there will be no displays of affection inside this library!" George protested.

"That is interesting...Angelina told me that you two 'ave had some interesting times in here," Fleur retorted, unabashed, making George glow like the setting sun.

"I can't believe she'd...Angelina!" George roared indignantly, as he marched out of the library.

"Poor George, that's an argument he'll never win. We Weasley men are destined to be terrorised by our women. Just like dad!" he added with a rueful smile.

"And don't you forget it." Fleur giggled, before giving Bill a quick kiss before she left the four Weasleys alone.

Then Bill looked at Ron. "It isn't like we don't want the bratty little brother around, but Charles, Percival and I have some private matters to discuss."

Charlie shook his head. "It's okay, Billius. Ronald can stay...isn't that right, Percival?"

"Your full names will look very distinguished on your tombstones, if you don't cut it out!" Ron growled.

Bill waved his wand to close and lock the doors to the library, and then he cast a one way Silencing Charm around the room. They could hear what happened outside, but no one could hear them.

"What's the secrecy all about?" Ron asked, growing more and more curious by the second.

"Remember the talk we had before coming here?" Charlie whispered, even though it wasn't really necessary.

"About not saying the wrong name when you're shagging..."

"Not that!" Charlie hissed. "About the one that got away."

"Ah, that!" Ron grinned. "Yeah, what about her?"

"Bill and Percy have been helping me find her."

"Oh...any luck?" Ron asked.

Bill shook his head. "Sorry Charlie. But her name is not registered with any Ministry of Magic...right Perce? And that picture you have of her didn't help either. It's like she's a ghost...like she never existed."

"A ghost who has come back to haunt me. How appropriate." Charlie hung his head.

"Have you got a picture?" Ron asked.

Charlie reached into a pocket of his robes and pulled out a six-by-four inch picture. He was about to show it to Ron. When the doors to the library shook. "Ron...are you in there? Open up!"

"It's Hermione," Ron said. "The Rangers have got the best detection magic in the world...if you ask nicely then maybe she'll help you."

"It's worth a try." Percy nodded, and Bill flicked his wand to allow Hermione in.

"Honestly...is this a secret meeting of some sort?" she joked and proceeded to greet Ron's brothers, before giving Ron a deep and passionate kiss that caused Charlie and Bill to cat-call and wolf-whistle, while Percy shook his head at his older brothers' behaviour.

"So...are you going to tell me what this is all about, or should I leave?"

Charlie was looking at Ron hopefully with big and pleading eyes, expecting Ron to ask Hermione for him. And Hermione being Hermione, she picked up on this immediately.

"You need me for something...don't you?"

"Clever, as always." Bill grinned, while Percy sealed the doors and placed the Silencing Charm once more.

"Well, it's like this..." Ron began. "Charlie met this girl...and..."

"Never mind...Ron. I'll tell her." Charlie said, resigning himself to tell his tale one more time.

"And when was the last time you saw her?" Hermione asked.

"March 31st...1996," Charlie said, without hesitation. "Will you help me?"

Charlie was now positively looking like a house-elf in need, and as expected, Hermione couldn't say no to him. "All right...but you haven't given me much to work with. Only an unknown alias...And I'll have to do it all on my own time."

"He's got a picture!" Ron said, remembering that Charlie had been about to show him a picture before Hermione came in.

Charlie hurriedly dug for the picture once more, and handed it to Hermione and Ron.

Ron saw that it was taken indoors, in a wizarding pub, Ron knew, because he saw a floating candle next to the pair in the picture...Charlie and the girl. She was an inch or so taller than Charlie, and had dark, wavy hair and intense dark eyes. Charlie was in fancy evening robes, and the girl wore a silk dress that brought out her shapely form well. She was no Veela, but she was still very

attractive. Charlie's picture self ran his hand across her back affectionately as the girl gave him several pecks on the lips, causing Charlie's picture self to blush.

The couple in the picture never got tired of looking at each other and the girl kept running her hand through Charlie's hair, while the other toyed with the pendant that hung on her necklace.

"Good Lord...I've found her!" Hermione gasped.

"What're you talking about?" Ron frowned. For once, Hermione wasn't making much sense.

"Have a closer look at that pendant, Ron! It's just like Max's. Look at the girl! Same complexion...she's tall...and those eyes...those are Max's eyes! I've found her...it's his sister!"

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A/N: That was chapter 18, oh noble readers. Didn't see that one coming...did you?

Please review to let me know what you think of this turn of events. I'd like to thank everyone who has reviewed, for reviews inspire. I'll do my best to make chapter 19 even better, and the way things are now, the wedding...and action...will return in chapter 20.

## Preparations

### Chapter 19

It took a great effort on Ron's part to force his eyes open. The angle at which the sunshine poured through the window hinted at a time past noon...well past noon. But he'd needed his sleep, having had very little before coming to England. Added to that was the excitement of the discovery of Max's sister, and the information the Rangers had been able to supply Hermione with.

He, Hermione, and his brothers had stayed up until five in the morning to discuss their course of action against Malfoy, for it turned out that Malfoy possibly had the means to baffle some magical detectors. But they had no way of verifying this until the wedding, when they'd see him again. Diggory had decided that it would be best for Malfoy to lie low until the wedding, giving them a very narrow window of opportunity to unmask him then.

Unfortunately this brought them no closer to solving Ginny's mysterious determination to marry Malfoy. Ginny had surreptitiously been observed for new bracelets and necklaces, but they had found nothing. Ginny had only been wearing that ring Harry had given her for her birthday.

An invisible hand squeezed his heart as he remembered the look on Ginny's face the day Harry had given her that ring. She'd worn a look of perfect happiness. It must have been one of the best moments in her life, because the ring had been an unmistakable sign that Harry had felt the same way about her as she had about him. But he'd never told her, and even though Ron had understood that Harry thought he'd been doing the right thing, he couldn't help being mad at his best friend for hurting his baby sister like that.

Hermione groaned and stirred in front of him, and Ron caressed her naked hip under the sheets. He smiled. Despite their need for sleep, they'd still found the time for an hour of pure passion. It had been a good thing that Hermione had remembered to place a Silencing Charm around the room, because he didn't want to deal with his mother's knowing glances today.

Ron briefly wondered how Ginny would feel about his sleeping with Hermione. After all, she hadn't been allowed to sleep with Malfoy...and Ron thanked the deities for that...but it was still a bit unfair. He let those thoughts slip and carefully brushed Hermione's hair aside and kissed her neck.

"Max..." Hermione muttered, and Ron's expression soured as the feeling of happiness was promptly replaced by a feeling of intense jealousy. "I...found...your sister..." The jealousy was shattered and replaced by a deep sense of shame. He should have known better. Wolfe wasn't his rival, and believing that Hermione had lied about her true feelings was an insult to her.

Ron reached over to the nightstand and grabbed his watch. He saw it was four in the afternoon, and he knew he and Hermione had to get up, no matter how comfortable they were right now. He roused her by gently kissing her shoulder, and moving up to her neck. She stirred, and he slid back a little, allowing her to roll over. Her eyes fluttered open and locked with his, causing another swarm of butterflies to invade his stomach. "Hi."

"I love you, Ron."

"I love you more, sweetheart," he said, gently planting a kiss on her hips.

"Nuh-uh!" Hermione smiled, and kissed his back, allowing her lips to linger on his.

It was an internal battle. Ron knew the signs. Hermione was very much in the mood, as was he, but they really had to get out of bed. He used the thought that they still had to find out how Malfoy was controlling Ginny to inject steel into his spine. "C'mon, rise and shine...it's about bloody time anyway."

Hermione groaned in protest and pulled the sheet over her head as Ron clambered out of bed and wrapped a robe around his tall frame. He'd let Hermione sleep a little longer while he took a shower. The bathroom was close by, since he and Hermione were staying in



Percy's room because it was the largest, second to the master bedroom. Besides, he didn't want to sleep in his own anyway. Not until every surface had been scoured at least twice, ridding it of Malfoy's taint.

Wide awake after taking his shower, he'd gone back to the bedroom, only to find Hermione still snoozing. "Get up, Mione," he bellowed, hoping that his loud voice and her pet name would irritate her enough to get her out of bed.

She just groaned and pulled the sheets over herself more tightly.

There was nothing else for it. He walked over to the bed, grabbed Hermione and hoisted her over his shoulder.

"Ron...what on earth do you think you're doing?" she screamed as he strode out of Percy's room and into the bathroom. "Put me down this instant, Ronald Weasley!"

"Okay, love!" Ron laughed as he put her into the shower, with the sheet still wrapped around her. Then he tapped the sprinkler head. "Cold water!"

Hermione shrieked as the cold water drenched her under the sheets, and she struggled to pull off the sheet.

Ron was greeted by a look of intense fury on her face, and his grin faltered. "Sorry love, but I had to take drastic measures," he explained hastily. "We have to find out what's wrong with Ginny, remember!"

Hermione's face softened slightly. "I'm still going to get you for this!"

"You've already got me, love!" he winked and walked out of the bathroom and made his way downstairs. He found Molly brushing some soot off her shoulders.

"Ron, would you be a dear and clean out the fireplace for me?"

"Mum!" Ron complained, not wanting to perform the particularly dirty task. "I just took a shower!"

"Honestly, do you and Hermione always sleep this late? When your father and I..."

"I'll clean the bloody fireplace, all right?" Ron interrupted her, hoping that she'd forget to relay the lengthy story of how she and his father behaved in her youth.

"That's a good boy!" his Mum beamed. "As I was saying, your father and I always used to get up bright and early to..."

To Ron's secret relief, the flames of the fireplace roared once more and interrupted Molly's lecture. Percy's head was floating in the flames. "Oi, Perce."

"I will not be addressed in such a vulgar way!" Percy said pompously.

"Hello, Percival, old boy!" Ron imitated Percy's pompousness. "Jolly good to see you, old chap. How is your lovely spouse..."

"Shut up!" Percy snapped, annoyed. "Where is Hermione?"

"Taking a shower. What do you need her for?"

"Four of her fellow Rangers are in my office right now. They'll be staying at the Burrow, and will accompany us to the wedding tomorrow."

This turn of events caught Ron by surprise. "Really? What for?"

"You'll hear about it when they get there. Now stand back!"

Ron and Molly took a few steps back while Percy's head disappeared. Seconds later, the flames grew once more, and two small men were expelled from the fireplace. They were carrying a trunk between them. Ron recognised them as Gavin Carey and Docmor the Diligent. Then a small witch came flying out of the fireplace, landing with cat-like grace. It was the Hermione's housemate...Mayumi Sakai. Seconds

later, the fourth person had joined them...but Ron didn't recognise this woman.

"Hermione...we've got company!" Ron bellowed. Then he introduced his mother to the Rangers. "Mum, these are the Rangers, Mayumi Sakai, Docmor the Diligent..."

"But you can call me Doc," Doc added.

"Oh, my...a...a goblin?"

"Half-goblin," Doc corrected.

"I never knew that was possible," Molly gasped.

"Well, I am the first half-goblin in the recorded history of the wizarding world," Doc explained. "And my brothers and sisters and I are the only half-goblins in existence."

"But goblins and wizards simply don't mix," Molly said, unable to grasp the concept. "Not that I have anything against goblins...but I never thought a human could possibly be interested in a goblin...or the other way around for that matter."

"You're right about that, Mrs Weasley. Humans and goblins don't mix. My parents aren't really your average goblin and witch. My father is considered a bit odd by his fellow goblins, because he isn't as concerned with the pursuit of wealth as most other goblins are. And my mother...well, I haven't got her worked out yet. But even so, their life together is far from perfect. They've divorced and re-married a dozen times. They had me...had a fight...divorced, started courting again, mother got pregnant with Grimlock, they re-married, it went well for a while, fought, divorced, and so on and so forth until they had my youngest sister, Didi."

"And can all your brothers and sisters do magic?"

"Wizard magic?" Doc shook his head. "No...just me."

"Ron...aren't you to introduce the rest of the us?" the strange woman said...though her voice sounded oddly familiar to Ron.

He regarded her carefully, and soon he realised who she was. "Gudrun?"

Gudrun rolled her eyes. "Yes...Gudrun! Really, what is wrong with you men! You're the third one who didn't recognise me today."

Ron looked her over. She wore her usual tight fitting clothes Muggle clothes and a dragon-hide jacket. Her hair was a dark blonde, her natural hair colour, Ron assumed. And without all the iron in her face...Ron had to admit to himself she didn't look half-bad.

"Once you're done ogling Gudrun, you can introduce me to your mother, Ron," Gavin chuckled, causing Ron to turn crimson.

"Right...Mum, this is Gavin Carey."

"Are you Cyrus' son?" Molly asked.

"No ma'am, he's my uncle. I'm Gareth's son."

Molly smiled. "Gareth's the younger brother." Molly nodded, remembering. "I briefly dated your uncle, before I met my husband...you know?"

"Mu'um!" Ron groaned. "You can tell them about your girlhood flings later." Then he turned to the Rangers. "So what brought you here?"

"Our love for weddings." Gudrun grinned.

Doc gave the Icelandic witch a mock-scowl. "Actually, we do want to attend the wedding. It'll make it easier for us to find out if Malfoy indeed owns something similar to a Confundus Amulet," he patted the trunk. "We've got some equipment that should flush him right out."

"Brilliant!" With the Rangers' help, maybe they'd be able to unmask Malfoy before the ceremony.

"What about your sister?" Gudrun inquired. "Did you find out what was wrong with her?"

Ron shook his head. "She isn't wearing an Enslavement Collar," he growled in frustration.

"Maybe she is being forced somehow...not through magic," Mayumi said quietly.

"That's not possible," Molly said. "Malfoy couldn't have threatened her. I didn't leave them alone long enough for him to get a chance to do that. Besides, my daughter isn't easily intimidated."

"Yeah, Mayumi...don't be stupid!" Gavin sneered.

Ron was puzzled by his behaviour. Everybody knew how Gavin felt about Mayumi... and now he jumped at the chance to put her down. His behaviour didn't make any sense. It seemed as if he were angry with her for some reason. Hermione bounding down the stairs, followed by Ginny, interrupted his thoughts.

"Doc, Gavin...what are you doing here?" Hermione gasped. "Gudrun? Look at you!"

"Yeah, yeah!" Gudrun scowled. "I look normal! Really, I don't see what the big deal is." She reached into the pocket of her dragon-hide jacket and drew out a package of chewing gum. She proceeded to stuff half a dozen sticks of gum into her mouth.

"We had some time off and decided to visit," Gavin lied smoothly, since it was best that Ginny didn't know the reason for their presence. He walked over to Ginny and extended his hand. "You must be the lovely bride-to-be?"

A slight blush crept up Ginny's cheeks, and she nodded.

"Ginny, dear...you wouldn't mind inviting these nice people to the wedding tomorrow, would you?"

Ginny gave Molly a sad smile. "I don't see why not. There'll be plenty of room. A lot of the people I invited cancelled."

Ron winced. The look on Ginny's face was breaking his heart. Indeed, nearly half the people she'd invited had declined the invitation with some silly excuse. If it would have made his little sister feel any better, Ron knew that he'd have hunted these people down and dragged them to the wedding. He'd always had this desire to protect his baby sister and keep her happy, even if he hadn't shown it in his early teens. But Ginny's happiness meant everything to him. He would even have given Malfoy his blessing, if he'd been sure that Malfoy would have made her happy. But it just so happened that Malfoy was a cold-hearted monster...and possibly very dangerous.

"Come on...Ginny," Molly said, grabbing Ginny by the arm. "We have to do some last minute preparations, and I still have to talk to Narcissa about some things," she sighed. "Ron...will you tend to our guests?"

"Okay, Mum," Ron said.

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"So, what's the plan?" Ron asked, after Ginny and Molly had gone.

"We'll probe Malfoy with a special scanner we use to test our own amulets," Gudrun explained. "It'll detect the jamming properties of the amulet."

"What if it doesn't work?" Hermione asked worriedly. After all, if they didn't expose Malfoy, Ginny was going to be stuck with him for a long time.

"If he's wearing a Confundus Amulet, it'll work."

"But what if he takes it off?" Hermione asked.

Gudrun bit her lip and looked around the table, uncertainty etched in her features. It was the first time that Hermione saw her housemate get nervous. "We have to hope that he's paranoid enough that he

never takes it off. But he doesn't have any reason to assume that someone will be carrying a detector to see if he's taking his vows seriously."

Ron slammed his fist on the table. "Unless we give him reason to."

"What do you mean?" Hermione frowned.

"We spread a rumour that the angry brothers will be attending the wedding with a Sneakoscope. That ought to make him wear the amulet." Ron grinned.

"But he'll just tell his mother to make a scene and forbid it," Hermione countered.

"I'm counting on it. Then we reply by making it known that he has nothing to fear if he truly loves our sister. If I know Malfoy, he won't be able to resist the chance to publicly humiliate me. He'll insist that we keep the Sneakoscope in plain sight, so everyone can see that he's being sincere. He'll wear the amulet!"

An ear to ear smile spread onto Doc's face. "It seems like we'll have a new Ranger soon." Then he looked at Hermione. "Oh, Galatea told me to thank you for your advice."

Hermione frowned. She had no idea what that advice would be. "When did you see her?"

"Shortly before I left for England. Wolfe borrowed my carpet a couple of days ago, for a date with Galatea. I went to get it back, and Galatea answered the door to his quarters." Doc grinned toothily. "She was positively glowing, and Wolfe had the silliest grin on his face. I think getting laid loosened him up a lot."

Gudrun laughed. "If I'd known that all that was needed to loosen him up was a good lay, I'd have volunteered for the cause a long time ago."

Gavin muttered something under his breath as he left the table, and Mayumi flushed red. But the others hadn't caught the significance of that exchange. Only Hermione knew what it had to be about.

"Seriously, Gudrun. Wolfe only has eyes for Galatea."

"What about you, Ron?" Gudrun asked coyly. "Is Hermione the only girl who catches your eye?"

Ron shook his head. "Plenty of other women catch my eye all the time."

The surge of jealousy caught Hermione unaware. "What do you mean by that, Ronald Weasley?" she burst out.

"Don't worry, love. My eyes may stray but my heart won't ever leave you!" Ron said, before he took her hand and kissed it.

Hermione was furious, but not at Ron. She was furious at herself for allowing Ron to wind her up like that, and not being able to stay angry with him after his sweet gesture. "All right, we have to get to work," she said in an attempt to change the subject. "We still need to put Ron's plan into motion. How are we going to do that?"

"Through Percy," Ron said. "We don't know where Malfoy is hiding, and Percy doesn't either...but Diggory does. We'll have Percy tell Diggory, who will tell Malfoy. We proceed according to plan from there... which reminds me..." Ron looked at Mayumi, Doc and Gudrun. "How many people know you're here?"

"The Minister, two Aurors, and your brother, of course. We told Diggory not to reveal our presence to anybody."

"And the Floo connection you used to talk to us and travel here with?"

"We made sure it was secure before using it," Doc said. "No one knows we're here."

Hermione leaned back in her chair. She hoped Doc was right about that.



\*\*

"Any news?" Anastasiou asked, as he surveyed the brewing of the potion down in the dungeon.

"Our spy in Concordia tells us one of our drones has been caught. The Ranger!"

Anastasiou looked at the messenger. He was young...barely fifty, and he used to be a Muggle. "How does she know?"

"She says she never saw him around again."

"Change in his habits?"

The young vampire nodded.

"Pity. He was an excellent source."

The young vampire looked down into the dungeon. "I'm curious. What went into that cauldron, anyway?"

Anastasiou smiled. Having been a Muggle, this vampire knew little about magic. The fact that he'd known about the magical community for fifty years should have changed that. "Your ignorance is annoying, sometimes, Martinez. You should have schooled yourself in the ways of a wizard."

"What's the point...I don't have their powers."

"And I lost mine when I turned," Anastasiou said.

Martinez looked surprised. "You did?"

"Of course. Why else do you think I never practice magic anymore?"

"I guess I never thought about it that way." Martinez frowned and stared into the bubbling liquid in the giant cauldron. "So what's in it?"

Anastasiou liked to be in control. He couldn't brew the potion himself. A wizard's aura needed to be present during the brewing in order to make a magical potion work...no matter how many of the ingredients were magical. But that hadn't stopped him from memorising the ingredients and procedure. "The base elements... ten gallons of water, with a gallon of Flobberworm secretion to thicken the potion. Three pints of armadillo bile and half a pint of Lobalug venom. Two gallons and quarts of unicorn blood...from an adult male unicorn, three gallons of dragon blood... from a female Chinese Fireball. We let it warm up on a low fire for five hours while stirring it counter clockwise with an oak ladle. Then we add two gallons of Re'em blood, for increased physical strength."

"Male or female?" Martinez asked.

"Gender doesn't matter with the Re'em blood. But it's good that you pointed it out. It shows that you pay attention to detail," Anastasiou praised. "Now where was I... ah yes...we keep it just below boiling point for fifty-seven minutes after adding the Re'em blood, stirring it counter clockwise with a silver ladle before adding eighteen ounces of powdered horn of a Romanian Longhorn dragon. After several incantations have been done, two Murtlap growths and the head of a rattlesnake are added."

"Murtlap is used for resistance against hexes and curses, right?"

"Yes."

"So what is the rattle-snake head for?"

"I'm not sure!" Anastasiou said. "Anyway it's been boiling for thirteen hours and seven minutes now. Three more minutes to go, before Mr Potter can immerse himself in the cauldron. He is being prepared as we speak."

"What if it doesn't work, and Potter gets boiled alive?"

"That's what all the preparation is for. Heat-proofing charms are being cast on him. It is also part of the whole ritual. "Anastasiou shrugged. "If it still doesn't work, we'll serve the potion to the dark trolls as soup."

But the notes haven't given me the impression that this ritual was tailored specifically to Voldemort, and our potions brewers and rite-master concurred." He paused, because he saw four dark trolls escorting the Mistress onto their balcony, and he bowed. "Are you here to watch the ritual...my lady?"

"Indeed, Athanasios." She nodded. "I wanted to decorate my chambers some more, but the paintings I want are not available. I want you to get them for me."

Anastasiou knew it was no use to argue. "Very well. Which pieces did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking, anything of Rubens will do."

Anastasiou smiled. "Ah, yes...Rubens."

"Did you know him?" Martinez asked.

"Oh yes...I was young then...your age, no, younger!" he reminisced. "I had one of his servants for dinner."

They waited for a few more minutes, until Potter walked into the dungeon below, wearing only a loincloth. Then he climbed onto a ladder. He stood on a platform at the edge of the cauldron and looked into the bubbling liquid. Then, seemingly without a second thought, he jumped in and disappeared into the reddish goo.

"After he emerges...he will no longer be human." The Mistress smiled.

"How will he change?" Martinez asked.

"He'll be strong...ten times stronger than he used to be. And very few things will be able to harm him," Anastasiou said. "He will be nearly invincible."

"Nearly?" Martinez frowned.

"Voldemort was defeated, even after he underwent these transformations. So we have to assume that Potter won't be entirely invincible."

Lord Anastasiou...my Lady!" a hoarse voice called.

"What is it, Vlado?"

A witch, who was carrying a large bag, accompanied the old wizard.  
"The Portkeys are here."

"Send Tetsuo my congratulations. His efficiency is commendable. What about the beasts?"

"Master Yamato says the beasts are ready for use...my lord," Vlado said.

"Good!" Anastasiou said, and waved his hand to dismiss the two wizards, who withdrew quickly. Then he turned to the Mistress. "My lady...I will need some of your guards tomorrow."

"And you will have them." She nodded.

"Excellent. Now, may I be excused? I need to start planning tomorrow's assault."

The Mistress nodded absently, completely engrossed by the bubbling cauldron below.

Anastasiou and Martinez bowed, and retreated from the dungeon. Then they made their way up to Anastasiou's chamber, where Vlado and Von Brandenburg were already waiting for them.

"Why isn't Selene here?" Von Brandenburg asked.

"She is no longer trustworthy. I may not be a mind-reader, but I know she's waiting for her chance to escape. Did you move the boy?"

Von Brandenburg nodded. "We've taken him to the compound in Morocco."

"Excellent. What's the status on tomorrow's shock-troops?"

"Three dozen wizards from different cells will Portkey to Hogwarts tomorrow. They've all been given identical clothing to prevent friendly-fire situations."

"Three dozen isn't enough to win that fight." Martinez argued. "I've scoped out the opposition. Nine Aurors will be present, and from what I've read in reports about some of the guests, they will mount stiff resistance."

"We've also got the dark trolls and the beasts," Anastasiou said. "And our purpose is a short assault. In and out. It should all take less than ten minutes."

Von Brandenburg cleared his throat. "Lord Anastasiou...I was wondering. How will you prevent Potter from dismembering Malfoy the moment he lays eyes on him? Does the collar prevent it?"

"I haven't taken any measures to prevent it. The collar will only work if he's about to betray me. Killing Malfoy is no such betrayal. I'm hoping Malfoy has the presence of mind to use the Portkey before Potter can get to him."

"You don't value his life much." Von Brandenburg frowned. "With all due respect, this attitude hasn't endeared you to most of your people. They fear that you think they've outlived their usefulness."

This remark sobered Anastasiou up. He realised that Von Brandenburg was right. He had become arrogant lately. "You're right." He turned to Martinez. "Send a message to Tetsuo Yamato. I want to know whether the special collar's properties can be broadened...now!"

Martinez bowed and left the room.

\*

Draco paced about in the small living room, annoyed and repulsed by the mere sight of the two Muggles who shared his protection. They were huddled in the other corner, as far away from him as possible. They were terrible...Petunia and Dudley Dursley. He almost felt sympathy for Potter. Ten years with these people would indeed be a long time.

To make matters worse, they had to attend the wedding tomorrow, because Diggory had said that it wouldn't be prudent to split the Aurors up. His mother would have a fit if she heard that there would actually be a couple of Muggles at his wedding. Of course, they would have their uses. Their presence would distract Potter long enough for him to make a clean getaway with Ginny. After all, he didn't completely trust this control that his contact claimed to have over Potter.

An Auror came in after having knocked on the door. "Mr Malfoy...I have a note from your mother.

Draco took the parchment and unrolled it.

Son,

I've heard that the Weasleys will be taking a special Sneakoscope to the wedding, to make sure your vows are made sincerely. I have protested against it very strongly, of course, but I did not have an answer for them when they said that you'd have nothing to worry about if you were truly sincere. What should I do?

Draco crumpled the parchment and threw it in the fireplace, before summoning some fresh parchment along with a quill and inkbottle. The Dursleys cringed at the display of magic.

Mother,

Do not worry. My sincerity will be completely evident.

He smirked as he wrote the sentence down. The Sneakoscope would not react, and the public humiliation would get the Weasleys off his case once and for all!

He folded the piece of parchment and walked out of the room to find the Aurors. He found one of them sitting in the kitchen. He handed the note to the Auror. "Make sure that my mother gets this right away."

The Auror scowled and muttered something under his breath, but he complied nevertheless, having received instruction from the Minister himself to see to all of Draco's needs. With a satisfied smirk, he climbed the stairs and went up to his bedroom, and began to prepare for the next day. He'd be at Hogwarts at noon, and the ceremony would start at noon. Then, Ginny Weasley would be his... and at least one of her brothers would be dead!

\*\*\*

A special thanks to my beta and proof readers. They're responsible for the elimination of 99% of the errors. I would also like to thank everyone who has reviewed, and take this moment to drop to my knees and beg for more. I know it isn't all about reviews, but I'm addicted to the darned things, What can I say. Anyway, chapter 20 is finished, and I'm working on 21 now. Many people have asked questions about Harry and why he's evil, and I have a feeling that quite a few readers have stopped reviewing because they didn't agree with that. I could be wrong, but I still got that feeling.

Have a little faith in me. I know what I'm doing. Anyway, please review, of course." I'll post chapter 20 as soon as I hit the 260 review mark.

Disclaimer: Monty Python and Fawlty Towers alert. :-p

Buying Time

Chapter 20

Ron was nervous. There was no point in hiding it, for too much was at stake. He kept tugging at the collar of his dress robes nervously.

"Take deep breaths!" Gudrun, who had been taking deep drags from her cigarette, said.

"How do you deal with the pressure?"

"Are you kidding?" Gudrun laughed. "Or haven't you noticed that I'm smoking like a chimney!"

Ron forced a grin onto his face and turned to look out of the window and into the garden where he saw Mayumi and Gavin...who kept moving away from Mayumi whenever she came too close. "What is going on between those two?"

"Haven't got a clue," Gudrun replied tersely. "They've been that way ever since they got back from Japan."

"Gudrun...you're not going to believe this!" Doc screamed as he came clambering down the stairs. "The focussing crystal in the amulet detector is busted."

Gudrun nearly swallowed her cigarette. "What?"

"You heard me!"

"Why didn't you check it yesterday?" Gudrun yelled

"I thought you would check it!"

"No, you nit-wit! I specifically asked you to do it, right before dinner!"



"Doc's brow furrowed as he seemed to dig into his memory.  
"Whoops!"

"Whoops...what do you mean whoops?"

Doc heaved an annoyed sigh. "So I made a mistake." He stuck out his short arm. "Here, open my wrist!"

"I would, but there's no point in doing so, since goblins don't have major arteries in their wrists." Gudrun scowled.

"Of course not...do you think I'm stupid?" Doc smirked.

"Wait a minute...so we won't be able to catch Malfoy?" Ron groaned, feeling his breakfast rising up out of his stomach.

"Doc... get your goblin butt to the Citadel and get me that part... now!"

"I'm going." The half-goblin nodded and bolted up the stairs.

"Will he be back in time?" Ron asked worriedly.

Gudrun rubbed her forehead. "You'd better get Hermione down here."

"Hermione!" Ron bellowed.

"Don't yell my name like that...you'll wear it out! What is it?" Hermione yelled back.

"Get down here!" Ron answered, and Hermione came stumbling down the stairs about thirty seconds later.

"What?"

"The detector thing is broken, and Doc went to Concordia to get a spare part," Ron said.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Hermione burst out angrily. "Are you brainless? Why didn't you think of this yesterday?"

"What're you yelling at me for?" Ron screamed back. "It's not my fault!"

"I wasn't yelling at you!"

"But you were looking at me!"

Gudrun cleared her throat. "Stop behaving like a married couple and listen up! This is an unfortunate result of miscommunication between Doc and me, and arguing about it right now is a waste of breath. I know this isn't a good excuse, but I don't normally do the mission planning. Gavin's the planner, and he usually keeps track of these things...but it seems he's preoccupied with something."

"Don't you dare blame him for this!" Hermione admonished. Then she took a deep breath. "Okay...will Doc make it back in time?"

"I don't think he'll make it before the ceremony." Gudrun said. "It'll take him four hours, at least."

"And we've got three hours..." Hermione ran her hands through her now sleek hair nervously. "We have to stall the process at every possible opportunity to buy him time. Get Mayumi and Gavin in here."

Gudrun walked over to the kitchen door and called the other two Rangers in.

"What's wrong?" Mayumi asked.

"In a nutshell, the amulet detector doesn't work, and Doc went to Concordia for the replacement part. He won't make it back in time...and we need to stall for at least two hours." Gudrun said quickly.

"So what do we do?" Mayumi asked.

"Hermione...is Ginny wearing her wedding dress yet?"

"No...Narcissa Malfoy was taking care of the dress. It'll arrive in about an hour." Hermione answered.

"How?"

"She'll take it over by Floo. The Ministry has unblocked the two fireplace connections for the transport."

"So we block the fireplace," Gavin said. "Not now...but in about fifty minutes or so."

"How do we do that?" Ron shook his head. "Did you want to board up the fireplace?"

"Bad Floo powder!" Gavin said, with a mischievous smile lighting up his face.

Ron slapped his forehead. "Brilliant!" One of the primary causes of the Floo network's occasional collapse was the usage of bad Floo. They'd use bad Floo in this fireplace, and effectively block it off for an hour.

"But there are other ways to get to the Burrow!" Hermione pointed out. "The wards allow relatives to Apparate. She'll just get one of your brothers to Apparate here with the dress, Ron!"

"Not if the relatives are all conveniently indisposed," Gavin said, his smile positively diabolical now. "Ron...can you arrange it?"

"It won't be a problem!" Ron said, as he glanced at his watch. "George and Charlie both have roles in the ceremony. They'll be at Hogwarts already when it's time for Narcissa to bring the dress here. Narcissa would have to go to Hogsmeade first, and then up to Hogwarts. By the time she finds someone who can come here, an hour will have passed."

"What about your other brothers and the in-laws?" Gavin asked.

"I'll drop by Percy's to tell him to make up some excuse in case Narcissa calls him. Bill and Fleur are staying at the Warren. I'll tell

them the same thing... though I think they'd be too busy with the children anyway to run errands for Narcissa."

"So that gives us one hour," Hermione noted. "We still need one more hour."

"We could always sabotage things at Hogwarts." Gudrun shrugged.

"With nine Aurors watching things?" Ron shook his head. "We'll get caught for sure...and then we'd have some explaining to do."

"Not if we distract the Aurors," Gavin said.

"What are you taking about?"

"We mobilise the Hogwarts staff to help us out."

Ron had a mental image of McGonagall sneaking around and transfiguring the wedding cake into a pile of dung, and laughed out loud.

"What's so funny?" Hermione asked crossly.

"I'll tell you later," Ron said. "And I think you ought to be the one to drop this dungbomb on McGonagall. After all, you used to be her favourite pet."

"Honestly...just because I was good at everything doesn't mean..."

"Don't rise to the bait, Hermione." Gudrun laughed, and as Hermione looked at Ron, she saw that twinkle that his eyes held every time he was deliberately winding her up.

"But what'll I tell Minerva? I can't just walk up to her and ask her to help us sabotage Ginny's wedding. And as far as she and everybody else knows, Malfoy really is a changed man."

"Then you'll have to explain to her why we suspect Malfoy," Gavin interjected.

"But that'll take ages."

"You'd better get going then."

"All right, I'll go. Just let me finish up!" Hermione nodded and walked back upstairs.

Ron got ready to Apparate to the Warren, when something occurred to him. "Hey, Gavin...we don't have any bad Floo powder."

"Don't worry about it. Floo powder is easy to corrupt," Gudrun said, and Gavin nodded.

"I'll go by George's house then," he said, before Disapparating.

\*

Ron re-appeared inside the foyer of the Warren.  
"George...Angelina...it's Ron!"

The telltale patter of small feet told announced the imminent arrival of his welcoming committee in the form of his twin nieces, and seconds later the two girls clung to his legs like a pair of frustrated Crups.

"Hello, girls!" Ron said as he tried to shake them off. Where's your mum and dad?"

"Why?" the girls chorused.

"I have to tell them something."

"Why?"

"Because it's really important."

"Why?"

Ron took a deep breath and tried not to lose his patience. Fortunately, George came to the rescue. "Let your uncle go, girls! Amelie's looking for you...she wants to play."

The girls let go of Ron and scampered off just as Arthur rounded the corner, clutching his pet rat Basil. The boy staunchly believed that the rat was actually a Siberian hamster, because George had told him so. "Daddy, something's wrong with Basil."

"He looks fine to me," George said, as he took the rat from his son and examined it.

"Daddy...Basil can talk."

As if on cue, the rat squeaked, "Que?"

George frowned, but then he smiled as understanding crossed his features, and he examined Basil's teeth. Ron looked over his shoulder to see what was happening, and saw that a bluish substance clung to the rat's teeth. "It looks like Basil's been nibbling on a Spanish Language Lollipop." He handed the rat back to Arthur and turned to Ron. "So what brings you here?"

"Bill needs to know about this too."

"He's in the library," George said, and they made their way through several corridors in the manor house, until they reached the library.

"Ron!" Bill smiled. "All dressed up already? Come to tell us to hurry up?"

"On the contrary," Ron said, and explained about the arrival of the four Rangers, and that they had brought a device that would expose Malfoy. "But it turns out the thing is broken, and one of the Rangers went to Nomad Island to get a replacement part. The problem is that he'll be back at least an hour after the start of the ceremony, and it'll be too late by then. We've already got on hour's worth of delay covered. We'll shut down the possibility of travel to the Burrow by Floo powder."

"How?" Bill frowned.

"Bad Floo," Ron replied. "But I think Narcissa would come to one of you and ask you to Apparate to the Burrow with the dress, since you and your wives can Apparate to there. So I came here to tell you to make up an excuse when she calls you."

"No problem." Bill grinned. "We've got three infants here...and the house-elves are at Hogwarts to attend the wedding of the one who enabled free house-elves to marry! So we won't be able to leave here."

"Wait, I didn't know the elves would take the day off," George said. "I'm their employer...I can't believe they didn't tell me about this."

"They're not taking the day off, you idiot. I just made it up as an excuse."

"Ah!" George grinned. "Good one!"

"So you'll tell the girls?" Ron asked.

"Yeah...we'll tell the girls to play along." George nodded.

"Great!" Ron said. "Now he'd just have to tell Percy about it. And George...Hermione's on her way to Hogwarts. She's going to try and talk the teachers into sabotaging the wedding preparations. Maybe you could give the teachers some ideas?"

"Excellent!" George whooped. "Are you serious?"

"I've never been this serious in my life. If we fail, Ginny's going to be with that git for a long time."

George's face turned serious. "Right."

"Why stall it, though?" Bill asked. "If we prove that Malfoy was wearing the amulet, the marriage will be annulled."

"But how would we prove it?" Ron pointed out. "No...it's best that we nab him at the start of the ceremony. Then we can pour some

Veritaserum down his throat and find out exactly how he's controlling Ginny, and what other illegal activities he's been up to."

"Sounds like a plan," Bill said.

"Good...I'm off to Percy's!" Ron said, and Disapparated.

\*\*

Hermione Apparated to Hogsmeade after she finished dressing, and left Mrs Weasley to do Ginny's hair alone. Mrs Weasley hadn't needed her presence anyway, since Hermione didn't know the first thing about makeovers, with or without magic.

"All right, Hermione?" an unfamiliar tenor voice said.

Hermione turned around and saw a group of older students looking at her. A boy, or rather young man, walked up to her. He seemed familiar...but she couldn't quite place him. "I'm sorry...."

"Dennis...Dennis Creevey!"

"Little Dennis Creevey, look at you!" Hermione gasped. "You've grown up!" It was true. He was by no means tall, but this five-foot-ten Dennis Creevey was far removed from the scrawny Dennis she'd known.

Dennis beamed. "So I've been told."

"And you're Head Boy?"

"Yeah...but my reign is nearing its end," he smiled. "I had my last N.E.W.T. yesterday. You're going to Hogwarts for the wedding, right? A bit early, aren't you?"

"I need to discuss some things with Professor McGonagall."

"Ah, well...you can ride in the carriage with us...you remember Natalie and Ameera?"



Hermione nodded and shook hands with the two girls. Natalie was a seventh year and Ameera a sixth year Gryffindor. "Ameera...Khan, right? Are you by any chance related to a Ranger of Illumination?" she asked, remembering the tough Combat Ranger.

The girl smiled and nodded proudly. "My uncle."

"I thought so," Hermione said, as they walked over to the carriages and stepped in. The carriage started moving by itself, and soon they were approaching the gates of Hogwarts. "Dennis, Ginny told me that you and Gabrielle Delacour are an item. Where is she?"

Dennis winced. "We're not together anymore."

"What happened?"

"I broke up with her a couple of weeks ago. She's still got three years in school... at Beauxbatons. I'll be here...she'll be in France." Dennis had a wistful look on his face. "I had to set her free, you know. If we still feel the same way about each other when she finishes school, we can build on that."

'That's very mature of you, Dennis."

"Gabrielle didn't quite see things that way," Dennis said, shuddering as his hand went up to touch his eye. "She's got a nasty left hook... hasn't talked to me since."

"I'm sure she'll realise you had her best interests at heart," Hermione said.

Dennis shrugged. "Maybe. I've got other things to think about anyway. I'm going to be an Auror soon. I got my letter of acceptance today."

"Congratulations. I'm sure Colin's proud."

"He is!" Dennis said, his face falling a little. "He's fading, though."

"How so?"

"He and Myrtle are really happy together. Professor McGonagall reckons they will be moving on soon. I got used to having him around, but I guess it's all for the best."

Hermione smiled. She remembered how Colin had come back as a ghost, and got on famously with Myrtle. "He'll always be with you...Dennis."

"I know. He told me," Dennis said, forcing a brave smile onto his face. "So...what's wrong with Ginny anyway? She doesn't believe that he's actually changed, does she? I mean, if I were marrying Malfoy I'd be worried."

Natalie and Ameera laughed. "Dennis...if you were marrying Malfoy we'd all be worried." Ameera added.

Dennis blushed. "Right...bad choice of words."

Hermione chuckled too. Then she got an idea. Maybe she could use these three later on. "Hey Dennis, what's the password to Gryffindor Tower?"

"Oh...Slytherins lte domum," Dennis recited. "You coming to visit us?"

She nodded. "I'll come by."

"Brilliant." Dennis beamed.

The carriage stopped in front of the entrance to the castle, and they got out.

"See you later!" Natalie waved, and the three Gryffindors headed towards Hagrid's old hut, which still functioned as the office for the Care of Magical Creatures teacher, while Hermione walked into the castle. She felt a slight ache in her heart as she remembered the fierce-looking, yet kind-hearted, half-giant, and she wondered who had replaced him. She hadn't asked anyone about it the last time she'd been at Hogwarts, but her mind had been on other things back then.

Mrs Norris walked up to her and gave her a disdainful look, Filch not being far behind. "How may I help you?"

"Hello, Mr Filch. I'm Hermione Granger...I'm here for the wedding," She said, surprised that Filch hadn't recognised her. She'd imagined him to be just the sort of cranky old coot that never forgot a face.

"Ah, yes...the wedding." Filch nodded. "We're a bit behind schedule, but I reckon everything will be done in time."

Hermione fought to suppress a smile. She almost felt sorry for having to ruin Filch's work. "I trust that it will be. I'm a bit early, as you can see. I'd like to speak to Professor McGonagall."

Filch nodded and lead Hermione to the Headmistress' office. She knew the way, but she didn't know the password, so it was just as well that Filch was accompanying her.

"How are things in Concordia?" Filch asked all of the sudden.

"Fine. I assume you've been there?" Hermione asked, since it sounded like he was familiar with the place.

The caretaker nodded. "When I was a young man...I've already got something lined up there for my retirement. The weather's better than it is here...and people like me aren't discriminated against as badly."

Hermione saw his point. In Concordia, being a squib, dormant wizard being the politically correct term, wasn't as bad as in the rest of the wizarding world. There were about thirty dormants in Concordia, and like Filch, they all had jobs that didn't require magic per se. "I know!"

On their way up, they encountered Professor Lupin, who seemed to be headed in the same direction.

"Well, if it isn't Hermione Granger." He pulled her into a brief hug. "You're early."

"I know. But I have to talk to Professor McGonagall."

"Me too!" Lupin looked at Filch. "I'll take her off your hands, Argus!"

Filch gave a brief nod before disappearing into the corridors, no doubt looking for students who were out of bounds.

"Hermione..." Lupin began. "Harry...is it true?"

"We know it was him...but no one can say why he did it, or if he did it out of his own volition." Hermione said quickly.

"Harry can resist the Imperius Curse." Lupin said.

"There are countless other ways to control people, Professor Lupin," Hermione said irritably. "Surely you don't think..."

"I know how hardship can shape a person's soul...but no, I don't believe he'd do something like this of his own free will," Lupin said, taking her hand and patting it reassuringly. "Come on, let's go to Minerva."

"How is she?"

"Busy with the preparations for the wedding."

"Ah!" Hermione grimaced as her insides squirmed guiltily.

"Something wrong?" Lupin asked, noticing her troubled expression as they reached the gargoyles.

"Only the reason for my visit," Hermione said.

"Is it about Harry?"

Hermione shook her head.

Lupin shrugged and addressed the statue. "Golden rule!" he said, and the statue jumped aside as the entrance revealed itself.

They stepped onto the stairs, and like an escalator it carried them up towards the door to the office. Lupin knocked.

"Enter," Hermione heard McGonagall say in her usual crisp voice.

Lupin pushed the door open and allowed Hermione to precede him.

"Hermione..."

"Early...I know," Hermione said and spared a glance to take in her surroundings. Her breath caught in throat. "Is that...Fawkes?"

McGonagall smiled. "Yes it is. He came back at Easter. I was ever so surprised to see him, after all, he was Dumbledore's friend, not mine," she said, as she walked around her desk and gave Hermione a brief yet motherly hug. "So to what do we owe this early visit? I assume it couldn't wait until the wedding?"

"It couldn't." Hermione nodded. "Can anybody overhear us in here?"

McGonagall shook her head. "Albus and Filius came up with some Charms that detect and corrupt any listening devices and charms back when Fudge tried to spy on us, remember?"

Hermione smiled. "Then I'd like you to call Professor Flitwick and Professor Snape up here. Who is teaching Care Of Magical Creatures?"

"Lara MacFusty," Lupin said.

Hermione frowned. Why did that name sound familiar? She knew the MacFusty family had been charged with looking after the Hebridean Blacks, but that wasn't where she knew the name from. "Was she in Gryffindor?"

"Six years ahead of you, I believe." McGonagall confirmed.

"She'll become the Head of Gryffindor House next year," Lupin said.

"Why? Are you leaving? Is the Ministry giving you trouble again?" Hermione asked worriedly. After all, being a teacher provided Lupin with housing and a steady income...something he'd had to do without for the better part of his life.

Lupin laughed. "No, it isn't like that at all. Diggory is much better than Fudge was, and Percy and Charlie are pressing for some major reforms for werewolves. It's just that I can't be there for my students on full moons. If something were to happen, they'll need someone who can be there for them at all times."

"Well, I guess she has to hear this too... but can she be trusted like the others can?"

"Yes," McGonagall said, with so much conviction that Hermione found it hard to doubt her. "She was one of our best people in the war."

"That's good enough for me." Hermione said.

McGonagall called Flitwick's office first, and soon the diminutive wizard stepped out of McGonagall's fireplace. While he greeted Hermione warmly, a young woman dressed completely in dragon hides stepped out next. She hadn't changed much since Hermione had last seen her. Her features were unlovely, as sharp as an unsheathed dagger and she had a cool and calculating look in her eyes. Lara had been a most severe prefect in Hermione's first year... Lara's seventh.

"What's the emergency, Professor McGonagall?" she asked, but the headmistress raised her hand to ward off any more questions while she tried to contact Snape.

"He's not in his office," McGonagall announced. "Remus...could you please find him?"

Lupin smiled and pulled out an old piece of parchment.

"Is that what I think it is?" Hermione asked, unable to hide her astonishment.

Lupin nodded and muttered the words that awakened the enchanted piece of parchment, and soon Hermione saw several lines appear on the parchment. Lots of dots were moving about since it was day time, and the last exams had taken place the day before. "Find Severus Snape."

Hermione saw the lines on the parchment changing again and the map seemed to zoom in. Snape's dot became more defined, and...

"Severus...you sly old...!" Lupin started laughing. "Ahem...I think we should give him a minute...he's with Megan, in her room."

"Megan Stewart?" Hermione asked, reading the name. "I don't know her. What does she teach?"

"Muggle studies," Lupin said. "She was two or three years behind me, at Hogwarts...Slytherin. She joined the teaching staff this year," he chuckled. "Oooh, Severus is going to be hopping mad when he finds out I've been spying on him!"

"A Slytherin teaching Muggle studies?" Hermione shook her head. "That's, err, unexpected."

"She's a half and half." Lupin said. "And her mother's good friends with mine...they were both in Hufflepuff. She isn't a bad woman, just very ambitious. I'm sure she'll send Severus on his way if he ever gets in the way of her career." He grinned.

"What about you...Professor Lupin? Aren't you seeing anyone?"

Lupin's blush emerged under the ever present stubble on his face...one of the marks of being a werewolf. Hermione knew that Professor Lupin would have to shave twice a day to keep his face smooth. "That's none of your business!"

"Madam Rosemerta," Lara MacFusty said, flashing them an unlovely smile.

Hermione managed to hold back a giggle. "Madam Rosemerta?" The barmaid was a curvy sort of woman with a pretty face, but Hermione couldn't imagine her with Professor Lupin. "Isn't she a bit too old?"

"No she isn't. She's only ten years older than I am." A broad and dreamy grin slashed Lupin's face in two. "I remember the first time I went to Hogsmeade. There she was..."

"Yes...a vibrant young lass!" Flitwick agreed. "Half the boys at Hogwarts had a crush on her in those years."

McGonagall clearing her throat snapped the two men out of their musings. "Well, is Severus available now?"

Lupin glanced at the Marauder's Map. "Yes, he's on his way to the Great Hall."

McGonagall held up a small note. "Could you please summon Severus, Fawkes?"

The Phoenix nodded and took the note in his beak, before disappearing in a shower of sparks.

A short while later, Severus Snape swept into the office. He raised his eyebrow as his gaze fell across Hermione. "Aren't you a bit early?"

"Good to see you too, Professor," Hermione replied coolly.

"Very well, now that we're all here, what is it that you wanted to tell us?" McGonagall asked.

Hermione took a deep breath. "Professor Snape, your Sneakoscope failed to register whether or not Draco Malfoy was trustworthy, didn't it?"

"Miss Granger," Snape said irritably. "You never ask a leading question if you don't already know the answer. Why don't you save us all some time and cut to the chase?"



"Okay. We've discovered, or rather drawn the conclusion that the Sneakoscope never reacted, even in a situation where we knew Malfoy was lying. Like a mirror that doesn't reflect a vampire. After joining the Order of Illumination, I have also discovered that it is very much possible to baffle a wide range of magical detectors with some special magical artefacts. Tetsuo Yamato is a brilliant and evil magical artefact inventor who has been known to build such artefacts, and I also know for a fact that Lucius Malfoy had had dealings with Tetsuo Yamato. We're positive that Draco owns this thing now."

"I know Yamato..." Snape began slowly. "But I never knew that Lucius Malfoy had had any dealings with him. I guess the Order of Illumination has some very good sources." He eyed Hermione speculatively.

"Yes, we do. Now, a small number of Rangers will attend the wedding, and they'll try to sniff out the device that Draco uses to baffle detectors. Unfortunately, the specialised detector required to accomplish this needs to be brought over from Concordia," she lied, deeming it unnecessary to tell the teachers that the Rangers had blundered. "The estimated time of arrival for this detector is one hour after the start of ceremony. But we need to stall the wedding for two hours, just to be safe. We've already got one hour covered, but we need one more."

McGonagall was clearly having trouble with this. "Sabotage the wedding...oh dear!"

Lupin seemed delighted by the idea. "I have just the thing...but it won't be easy to do this unnoticed. With the Aurors and all the guests, it's going to be tough. Can I ask George Weasley to help?"

"Ron's Apparated to the Warren to execute his part of the plan. We'll make sure that the bride is one hour late. When she gets here, we have to execute the second part of the plan to further delay the wedding...if we have to. The Ranger might make it back in time for this to be unnecessary. Will you help me?"

"Sure." Lupin grinned.

"I've always liked Ginny very much. I wouldn't want her to end up with a criminal," Flitwick piped, and nodded. "I'll help."

"Why not." MacFusty shrugged.

"I won't be outwitted by Draco. If he is indeed in possession of such an artefact, he must be stopped." Snape nodded. "I have a question, though. Why did you summon the four of us?"

"I need MacFusty's knowledge of magical creatures. I was thinking about using pixies, lots of them, to disrupt the wedding when the time is right."

"I can summon a swarm of them. I just need an hour to whip up a batch of pheromone potion that will attract the little blighters," MacFusty said.

"And Professor Lupin, Professor Flitwick, and I?"

"I didn't want to do this without the knowledge of the heads of houses. I should've asked Professor Sprout too!" Hermione said, suddenly remembering the dumpy little witch that taught Herbology.

"She's not here today. Had to go to the Netherlands to pick up some special seeds she wants to use next year, so don't worry." McGonagall clapped her hands. "Well, let's get on with it!"

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A/N: Thank you, oh noble readers, for the reviews. I'll post chapter 21 after reaching the 290 review mark. You might not think this chapter is worth so many reviews, but believe me, chapter 21 is done, and I think it is the chapter you've been waiting for. So the sooner you help me reach 290, the quicker you'll get to read the chapter.

A special thanks to the people who've reviewed.

Disclaimer: Throughout the story, I've borrowed a bunch of quotes that aren't mine. Credit goes to the people who came up with them. I don't remember exactly where and when I used them, but call 'em if you see 'em.

Important! Please Read.

Author's Note: Here it is, Chapter 21. You guys reviewed, so I was honour-bound to post it. Be advised, however, that it could have some mistakes, since it has been betaed only once, instead of the usual two times. Ashwinder's computer got fried in a storm. Let us all pray for her return online as soon as possible. And if you haven't yet, do read her stories. They're brilliant.

I hope you enjoy the chapter.

Cygnus Crux

Face of the Enemy

Chapter 21

Anastasiou regarded the Japanese inventor with steady eyes. "So you're saying it can't be done?"

The wizard shook his head. "I didn't say that, my lord. But trying to change the collar now would likely weaken it. Or the charms could fail entirely because of interference from the potion in which he is immersed."

"You believe it is too risky?"

"Personally, yes." Yamato nodded. "However, the collar he is wearing senses betrayal. If you expressively order Potter not to harm Draco Malfoy, and he chooses to do so anyway, the collar will sense it, and detonate."

"But I don't want that. Potter makes a more valuable weapon than Malfoy a spy." Anastasiou frowned. The way things were now, Draco

Malfoy was on his own. True, Malfoy had been a promising ally, but now that Anastasiou had Potter, the situation was entirely different.

"My Lord...if I may?" Von Brandenburg interrupted.

Anastasiou gestured an acknowledgement, allowing him to speak.

"I believe Potter wants revenge above all. But I believe he will go along with you if you ask him to spare Malfoy temporarily. Tell him he'll be able to do as he pleases with Malfoy after Malfoy has outlived his usefulness."

"That might convince him. Excellent suggestion, Wilhelm. Is Potter ready yet?"

"Not yet. But the ritual is entering its final stages," Von Brandenburg answered. He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it as he seemingly changed his mind.

Anastasiou noticed this. "Wilhelm, if you have something on your mind, tell me."

"It's about Selene. She wants to see her son. I think she is reading the minds of everyone she sees to find a clue as to his whereabouts. The secret of his location may have been compromised. I recommend that we move him out of the compound in Morocco and take him somewhere else. And we have to make sure that whoever transports him doesn't remember that they did."

Anastasiou pondered this. Selene was planning something, he was sure of it. He'd felt her trying to read his mind several times the last few days, but a vampire as old as he would be difficult to read, if he were resisting. And he'd made sure to close his mind every time he saw her. "Yes, I know." He turned to a black-haired witch who was Vlado's second. "Paula, find Selene tell her to meet me here in an hour. Then go to the dungeon and let me know as soon as Mr Potter is available."

The woman bowed and turned on her heel, leaving the chamber.

"How are the preparations for the action in Scotland going?" Anastasiou asked, looking at Yamato and Von Brandenburg in turn.

"My beasts are ready," Yamato said. "They too have been outfitted with Portkeys. These will activate when I give the signal. The Portkeys worn by the men will activate by themselves at two o' clock Zulu time. I reckon the ceremony should have ended by then." He patted a pocket of his robes. "I have Potter's right here."

"What about withdrawal?" Anastasiou asked.

"Also automatic. They will have ten minutes to accomplish the task, then they will be transported back to the locations they came from."

Anastasiou nodded. If any of these troops were to die, the bodies would be whisked away, leaving the British Ministry of Magic with no evidence to examine. Nothing would point in his direction, adding to the confusion. "Do you have any extra Portkeys left?"

Yamato nodded. "I have three left. Why?"

"Selene will be going to Scotland too."

"Are you sure that is wise?" Yamato frowned. "After all, a mind-reader is a very valuable asset."

Anastasiou's fangs glinted as he bared his teeth in a predatory smile. What Yamato didn't know was that Selene had become expendable. One of Anastasiou's trusted servants had reported that the boy had been showing signs of his mother's gift.

Selene hadn't known her parents and had therefore always been insecure about her heritage. She'd tried to read Anastasiou's mind to look for answers, but he'd always closed off his mind to her, lest she found out the truth. This had proven to be one of the nails in the coffin of their relationship. But he would make sure that little Charles would see his mother's killers through the memory of one of the foot soldiers who would be attacking Hogwarts in a few hours. He would use that to ensure the boy's loyalty to him, and nurture the boy's hatred of their enemies. Anastasiou stroked his chin thoughtfully. "It just so

happens that Selene's son inherited her gift. She's expendable. Is there a way to make sure that she doesn't return from Scotland, Tetsuo?"

"I could disable the return charm on the Portkey. I could also modify the Portkey...booby-trap it, if you will."

"How?"

"Oh, a delayed disorientation curse. I can set it to kick in half way through the operation. One of the Aurors will surely finish her off after she's been slowed down."

"I like it." Von Brandenburg smiled.

"How fast can you do this?" Anastasiou asked.

"Give me fifteen minutes."

Anastasiou nodded. "Do it."

Yamato gave a short bow, before he tapped what looked like a Muggle watch, with his ring finger. He was gone in the blink of an eye.

"I guess that's his newest Portkey." Anastasiou smiled. "An odd wizard, but his toys make our ambitions easier to attain."

"Yes, they do," Von Brandenburg answered.

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"What is taking Ginny so long?" Malfoy hissed angrily, as he advanced on Hermione.

"The Floo powder connection to the Burrow went down because of bad Floo," Hermione said calmly. After all, it was the truth. "She should be putting on the dress now."

"I know that! But why is she taking so long? The guests are waiting...Do you know how bad this is for my image?"

"You wouldn't want her to rush, would you?" Hermione smirked. She was enjoying Draco's nervousness. "I guess we should have let her prepare here at Hogwarts. I'm sure McGonagall would've let us borrow a room. Ah well, hindsight is always twenty-twenty," she added airily. "Now if you'll excuse me."

Hermione left the impatient Slytherin behind and went up to McGonagall's office. The Headmistress wasn't in, but she'd assured Hermione that her office could be used to communicate with the other Rangers, so Hermione briefly transformed the mirror into a communications mirror, like she'd done at the Burrow. She knew Gudrun had set up a second mirror there, enabling them to communicate.

The Icelandic witch's face appeared in McGonagall's mirror. "Yeah, what is it?"

"Any word from Doc?"

"I know he has the part. He made good time, and he's on his way back." Gudrun glanced at her timepiece. "I think it's time you start the diversion at Hogwarts now." Gudrun sniggered. "I should've given you something to record it with."

"Don't worry. Luckily George thought of that too." Hermione grinned.

"Outstanding!" Gudrun laughed, and looked over her shoulder. "You'd better begin with that plan. Ginny's getting ready to go. She's looking for the special Ministry Portkey. The guys and I will Apparate to Hogsmeade and go from there."

"All right." Hermione nodded, and pulled the little crystal circle off the mirror, ending the connection. She turned around and caught Fawkes staring at her with a twinkle in his avian eyes. "Well, I have to do this, you know! Otherwise Ginny will marry an evil, scum sucking, bottom dwelling piece of vermin. "Fawkes merely stared at her with that same look and for a second it seemed as if Albus Dumbledore was contemplating her. She guessed it was true, that pets took over some characteristics of their masters.

Hermione then called Professor Sinistra, who'd also been included in the plan, using McGonagall's fireplace.

"Yes, Hermione?" The resident stargazer of Hogwarts asked.

"It's time," Hermione said.

"I'll be right down," The witch replied, and her head vanished from the flames.

That was part of the plan. MacFusty and Lupin were already in the Forbidden Forest, their cover story being that they was searching for imps to study over the summer and use in their respective classes. But in reality, they were about to summon hundreds and hundreds of pixies that would be attracted to the wedding site on the grounds by the pheromones that Snape had surreptitiously sprayed earlier. Sinistra would go out on the roof of her tower, which would be the signal to start.

Hermione heaved a sigh of guilt as she hurried downstairs. She wished she could've warned Ginny's guests, but if all the bride's guests left the site, it would look suspicious.

She got to the Entrance Hall just in time to see the electric blue swarm of Pixies come dashing out of the trees and head straight for the wedding arrangements.

George, who'd been filming the guests, turned his magical recorder on the action outside, howling with laughter as the pixies tore into the decorations, completely demolishing the tent that had been set up for the outdoor celebration.

Draco, like some other guests, was doing his best to banish the pixies. But there were just too many of them. Four pixies ripped his wand out of his hand, while a dozen pixies grabbed him by his robes. He was lifted up ten feet or so and carried over to the long table that held the food, and dumped head first into the extravagant wedding cake.



Narcissa Malfoy and a handful of other guests were grabbed by the ears and tossed into the lake, and by now everyone except for a brave few had taken cover.

The mess was unbelievable...the destruction was absolute. It had worked better than Hermione had imagined it would.

George was clutching his sides, he was laughing so hard! And Millie and Susie, having the same slapstick sense of humor, were rolling on the ground howling with laughter.

"I say, what an unfortunate event," McGonagall commented, her lips quivering in an attempt to hide her own smile.

\*\*

At a quarter past one, Ron, his Mum and Ginny arrived at Hogwarts. The Portkey had taken them straight into the chamber behind the teacher's table. Ron saw that it hadn't changed much. The portrait of the Fat Lady's friend, Violet, still hung on the wall.

"What's all the commotion about?" Ginny asked, as she heard an exited buzz emanate from the Great Hall.

Ron had an idea what it was about, and he couldn't wait to see how the plan had worked out. He stopped Ginny from walking out of the room. "Draco might be out there. It's bad luck..."

"Tradition be damned." Ginny snapped and tried to shove him aside.

She ceased her attempts to push her brother aside when someone knocked on the door. "Is anybody in there?"

"Yes, the bride and her escorts." Ron answered. "Who is it?"

"Amos Diggory."

"Is Draco Malfoy with you?"

"Ah, Mr Malfoy is indisposed at the moment." Diggory answered, after a brief silence. "May I come in?"

Ron opened the door and Diggory quickly walked in.

"Oh, Molly...a disaster!" The Minister began. "A swarm of pixies came out of the Forbidden Forest and completely wrecked the preparations for the ceremony. Everybody is helping with the clean up and repairs. Mr Malfoy is getting his robes cleaned, and the Best Man is being treated by Madam Pomfrey."

Ron sniggered and tried to cover it up by coughing. "Crabbe? What happened to him?"

"Ah, well...the pixies pulled up his underpants rather vigorously, and he got a bit...err, constricted."

The door burst open and George strode in, followed closely by Hermione, who closed the door behind them. George was laughing hysterically, and to Ron's surprise Hermione wasn't bothering to cover up her mirth either.

"It was brilliant." George howled, gasping for air. "The pixies gave Crabbe...what did you call that, Hermione?"

"Atomic wedgie." Hermione clarified.

"Oh, it was priceless!" George chuckled, wiping the tears out of his eyes. "And I recorded all of it!"

"Ah, Miss Granger!" Diggory said, reaching over to shake Hermione's hand. "We need to discuss some things after the ceremony. It concerns Ginny's safety."

"What do you mean?" Hermione frowned.

"Well, given the Potter situation...for Ginny and Draco's safety, we were thinking of performing a Fidelius Charm with you as the secret keeper."

"Why me?"

"Excuse me! Don't I have a say in this!" Ginny huffed. "You can't go about discussing my life like I'm not even here!" Then she turned to Diggory. "And let me tell you a thing or two, Minister! First of all, don't call Harry a situation. If it weren't for him, none of us would be standing here. And secondly, even if he were dangerous I'd still not hide from him and the rest of the world, I don't want to crawl into a dark hole. I want to see my family!"

"Don't worry, Ginny," Ron said confidently "You'll be seeing plenty of your family." After all, he knew she wouldn't be marrying Malfoy today, or ever.

Diggory cleared his throat. "Well, the actual reason I'm here is to tell you that the ceremony will probably begin ten minutes to two. If everyone pitches in, everything will be repaired by then."

The door burst open once more, and the four Rangers came in. The half-goblin wizard gave Ron a brief nod, and Gudrun mimicked the gesture. Ron finally allowed himself to relax. "Good, you're here!"

Diggory smiled and nodded. "It can't hurt to have four Rangers present in these troubled times."

"What the hell happened out there?" Gudrun asked.

"The pixies were upset about not being invited to the wedding." George grinned. "A whole swarm of them completely trashed the place."

"So when will the ceremony begin? Gavin asked.

"I've been told that everything will be ready in half an hour." Diggory answered.

"Thank you, Amos." Mrs Weasley nodded. "Could you do me a favour and tell Narcissa that the bride is here?"

"Of course." Diggory nodded. But as he retreated from the room, Ron heard him mutter; "Minister...messenger boy...no respect these days!"

"Doc...glad you made it!" Ron said, the smile on his face expressing the relief he was feeling. Finally, Malfoy would get what he deserved.

"Where were you anyway?" Ginny asked, eyeing the half-goblin curiously.

"Oh, I had to rush back to the Citadel to get your wedding gift." Doc shrugged. "Gudrun forgot to bring it!"

Gudrun looked livid. "Doc, you can pucker those wrinkly goblin lips and kiss my tattooed..."

"Gudrun!" Gavin cautioned. "Watch your language. We have a virgin bride-to-be in the room." He said, winking at Ginny. "Can't have you corrupting her!"

Ginny scowled and gave him the finger.

Gavin shivered theatrically at Ginny's hostile look. "Oh, is it just me or did the temperature suddenly drop? I had better get out of here before my arms freeze and snap off!" He said as he moved toward the door.

"You're right! There are several other parts of your body, I'd much rather snap off..." Gudrun retorted.

"I love it when you talk dirty!" Gavin chuckled before hurrying out of the room.

"Gudrun, I didn't know you had a tattoo." Hermione said.

"It isn't in a very visible spot..."

"Could you please take this discussion outside?" Ron asked. After all, he didn't want Gudrun to contaminate his little sister with her wild

attitude. He knew that a spitfire like Ginny would take to it like a fish to water.

Gudrun laughed and winked. "Don't worry, Ron...I'll show it to you sometime."

Hermione's own smile vanished. "No, you won't!"

"Oh, don't be jealous, Hermione. I don't like red-heads." She looked at Doc. "Come on. Let's make sure the gift works!"

Ginny looked at Hermione questioningly. "What did they get me anyway?"

A very precious gift. Ron thought, as he watched the Rangers leave the chamber.

\*

The minutes dragged by, and the Rangers, Ron, Molly and Percy had joined the guests outside. Ron would be sitting with the sneakoscope in plain sight, and Doc and Gudrun would be setting up the device. Thankfully, Doc had also taken the time to test it first.

Hermione had been chosen to be Ginny's Maiden. She'd read all about it in a book about wizarding weddings. It was much like being a maid of honour, but she played a much more active role in the ceremony itself. Crabbe would be the Guardian, the equivalent of the best man. Bill and Percy would be the guardians of the North and South respectively, each representing one of the elements, and Charlie would be the Summoner, walking the Bride and the Maiden into the ceremonial circle.

After reading the book, Hermione had concluded that wizarding marriages were quite beautiful to witness. Pity that the wedding would end rather abruptly. She looked at Ginny, who was nervously toying with Harry's ring on her right hand.

Ginny had sent Hermione a letter in April, in which she described the day Draco had given her his engagement ring. It had nearly ended in

a break-up, because the git had been unwilling to accept the fact that Harry still held a very important position in Ginny's heart. He had insisted that Ginny take off Harry's ring, even though she wore it on her right hand as a friendship ring and not on her left hand as an engagement ring, next to Draco's. Ginny had refused to take off Harry's ring, saying that she could wear both rings. Draco hadn't been able to accept that, and in retaliation, Ginny refused to wear his engagement ring instead.

Hermione shook her head. She had been convinced that that argument had been a sure sign that Ginny would not follow through with the marriage, since Ginny had never worn Malfoy's ring since. She was really looking forward to finding out exactly how Malfoy had got her to change her mind overnight.

The door opened and Charlie poked his head in. "Ready?"

Ginny cast a nervous glance at Hermione, who nodded and handed Ginny her bouquet. Then Ginny took Charlie's arm, and he lead them out of the castle and walked towards the ceremonial circle.

The guests all stood up...Ginny's guests all looking like they were witnessing a funeral procession. Hermione quickly searched the crowd to find the Rangers, and she found them sitting in a row near the back, not too far from the frightened looking Dursleys, who were flanked by a pair of Aurors. Doc nodded and gave her a toothy grin and thumbs up.

Charlie delivered Ginny in front of the main altar, and gave his little sister a kiss on the cheek. Ginny responded by giving his hand a little squeeze before he reluctantly let her go. Then he joined his family on the first row, where Angelina, Ron, Molly and the three eldest Weasley grandchildren were sitting. The others had remained in the care of the house-elves at the Warren, being too young to attend a wedding.

The Priest and Priestess in charge of the Ceremony were a pure-blood pair of acquaintances. Apparently, they had married Lucius and Narcissa, and Hermione saw the Priestess eye her with disdain. She probably thought that a Muggle-born like Hermione had no business

attending a wizarding wedding, much less having a very important role in the ceremony.

Hermione absently registered the sound of several wizarding timepieces making an odd assortment of sounds as they struck two.

The Priest cast the Sonorus Charm before he opened his arms as he addressed the guests. "Marriage...marriage is what brought us here today."

A cold, cackling laughter rang out over the Hogwarts grounds. "Speak for yourself, old man! I had something else in mind."

As soon as the last word had been spoken, a roar coming from many throats cut through the silence. Hermione's head whipped around as she searched for the voice, and the roars. About five hundred feet away, near the edge of the Forbidden Forest, stood a cloaked figure. He was flanked by five Trolls on each side, and behind them more cloaked figures emerged. But the most terrifying things about these intruders were not the trolls. The trolls were handling what looked like a pair of manticores.

The hooded figure up front removed his hood, revealing a pale and hairless head with smouldering red eyes.

Ginny shrieked in fright, and most of the other guests did the same. Hermione couldn't produce a sound. She was afraid that the intense and irrational fear she was feeling would make her throw up. She leaned on the altar because her legs had become like jelly and wouldn't support her weight anymore. It just wasn't possible. People couldn't come back from the dead, and Harry had killed Voldemort. She was sure of it.

The Priestess however, seemed delighted by the arrival of this avatar of evil and ran towards him. "The Dark Lord has returned to us! I knew it. I knew they didn't kill you. I knew it was a..."

"Avada Kedavra!" The wizard roared, and a green light surged out of his wand and struck the woman. Her lifeless body hit the lawn an instant later. The wizard's cruel laugh froze the hearts of the guests,

who all seemed petrified by fear and unable to move. "The Dark Lord is dead! I killed him myself!" The wizard rose into the air a few feet, and began to hover forward slowly. "I killed him, delivering you from him, and I was banished for it! I am no longer Harry Potter...I am no longer the boy who lived! I am the right hand of vengeance, the one who will send you all to hell! I am death incarnate and the last living thing that you are going to see!" He pointed his wand at the ceremony. "Take no prisoners!"

\*

Ron felt sick. His nightmare had come to life. The wizard resembled Voldemort a great deal, but as he drew closer, Ron and the others could see the lightning shaped scar on his forehead. Harry had completely been consumed by evil now, and Ron knew there was no way Harry would ever return to the light.

The intruders were too numerous and powerful to defeat, but maybe...just maybe...they could be delayed long enough for the bulk of the guests to retreat to the safety of the castle.

"Move to intercept!" The lead Auror ordered, but half of his subordinates seemed to be frightened and shocked to move. They were young and inexperienced Aurors.

"Are you insane?" Ron roared. "They'll be killed instantly!" He turned to Diggory. "Get everyone who can't fight away from here. Anyone who is too afraid to fight can leave too. I can't use you like that!"

"You heard him!" Percy barked, also taking charge.

"We've sent out a distress signal seconds after that monster appeared. Reinforcement will arrive in five minutes!" Doc said, rushing over to the Weasley's side.

It'll be all over in five minutes! Ron thought to himself. "All right." He waved his wand and tipped the main altar over. The altar was reinforced by several charms and could probably repel curses.



The Rangers reacted quickly, and began summoning the benches the guests had been sitting on. Then they transfigured them into heavy metal blocks and stacked them up for a barricade.

Ron spared a glance backwards and saw that Diggory and a few older wizards were herding the Hogwarts students and the non-combatants away. Typically, Draco Malfoy was at the front.

"Where do you think you're going...Malfoy?" Ron screamed.

"Don't have my wand!" Malfoy screamed back, increasing his pace as he did so.

"Bloody coward," Ron muttered as he spared a glance at the defenders. George, Percy, Bill, Charlie, Ginny and his Mum were all there. Angelina was also present, clutching her wand in a white-knuckled grip, and a dozen or so witches and wizard had remained behind as well.

Ron eyeballed his mother and Angelina in disbelief. "What are you still doing here? The children need someone to take care of them if we don't make it, and by the looks of it none of us might make it out alive," he cried in outrage.

"We're going to fight!" Mrs Weasley said grimly. "If all of us die, Hannah and Fleur will take care of the children."

"Mum, no!" Ron roared. "Ginny, go to the castle!" He wanted to add something about Malfoy's cowardice and duplicity, but he realised that it was not the time to rub it in.

Ginny shook her head. She looked scared to death, but determined. "It's no use arguing."

"Ron!" Hermione screamed. "Now is not the time to bicker."

"They've released the manticores!" Gavin warned.

"Line up!" Ron ordered. "Killing curses as soon as you see the whites of their eyes!"

"Their eyes don't have whites!" A young man said. Ron recognised him as Dennis Creevey. The kid had no business being there, but Ron didn't have the time to argue anymore. From the corner of his eye, he saw Mayumi stand on her toes and kissing Gavin on the lips.

"I'm sorry that I've been so cruel to you. I love you!"

Gavin stared at her in disbelief and he brushed his lips with his hands. Ron had to call them to attention. "You have terrible timing, Mayumi. Now keep you eyes on those manticores!"

Gavin turned his attention back towards the attackers, and the defenders had all lined up behind the makeshift barricade.

"On my order...." Ron said, raising his left hand and waiting for the manticores to come just a little closer. Three hundred feet...two hundred feet..."Now!" Ron roared, and the defenders all shouted the feared words of the Killing Curse. A dozen green beams shot out of the tips of their wands. Seven of them hit the manticore of the left, and five crashed against the manticore on the right. Ron's face drained of all blood and he forgot to breathe as he witnessed the result, or rather, the lack of result. The beasts just kept coming.

"They're already dead!" Gavin groaned. "Killing Curse doesn't work!"

It was one of those moments where time seemed to slow down. It had happened far too often in his short lifetime. Ron had had far too many moments like this. He looked at Hermione, and found her staring back at him with a sad and apologetic look in her eyes. It was nobody's fault. Fate had caught up with them. Their number was up!

He looked at the others. Angelina and George shared one last kiss. Ginny gripped her mother's hand tightly, tears streaming down both their faces. Charlie, Bill and Percy just looked at the approaching manticores in disbelief. He knew exactly how they felt. He could only hope that the others would be spared, and that there was someone out there who could stop Harry. The manticores came closer and closer...one hundred and fifty feet...one hundred and thirty.

He looked up at the sky...cloudless and beautiful. It was midsummer, and the sun was still near its zenith. A beautiful day to die! Ron mused, relishing the blinding rays of the sun. Then the sun was gone...blocked out by a huge hovering sea-creature. I must be hallucinating! He thought, and the belly of the creature opened. It was laying eggs...two pair of shiny white orbs shot out of the belly. His eyes followed the orbs as they shot towards the ground...towards the two charging manticores.

A bright light...then the thundering sound of an explosion...followed by the huge shock wave that blew him off his feet. He landed ten feet away. His ears whistling. He looked at the sea creature, which was right over them. The rear part of its belly opened and a man tumbled out, falling a good fifty feet. But at the last instant, the man slowed down and made a soft landing. Half a heartbeat later, another touched down next to him...and another...and another. All of them armed to the teeth and wearing battle armour.

The one who had come down first knelt down beside him.

"Wolfe?"

The man nodded and yanked him to his feet before turning to Hermione and yelling instructions to her. She nodded and turned to the others, relaying the orders. Soon, his brothers were on the move, retreating with Angelina, his Mum, Ginny and all civilian witches and wizards. He felt a hand on his shoulder, gently but insistently trying to get him to move. He saw who the hand belonged to. "Hermione?"

"Ron...we have to go!"

He shook his head after he'd looked around. Despite the arrival of a dozen Combat Rangers, they were still badly outnumbered. "We can help!"

"No! Max told us to get out of here!"

"I'm not a Ranger yet, so he can't order me around!"

\*

Hermione ground her teeth together in frustration. Typically, Ron wouldn't listen

"Tactical retreat!" Faust ordered, and the Rangers began hurrying back to the castle.

"We can't!" Ron argued. "They'll have fair shots at our backs!"

"The Hurricane will cover us!" Faust said. "Now move!"

As Ron ran back to the castle, he looked over his shoulder and saw the war cruiser shoot several of those white orbs into their attackers. But the orbs seemed to shatter over a shield that protected the attackers. It was as if they were co-operating to create that shield. It was clear that they were very disciplined, and that the defenders would have been overrun quickly had it not been for the arrival of the Rangers. It suddenly occurred to him that the Rangers had arrived very quickly. But before he could entertain that thought any further, he saw Harry shoot curse after curse at the Ranger ship! The shields held the repelled five curses, but the sixth one breached them and hulled the cruiser. The craft wobbled violently before drifting off, all the while losing altitude. It plunged into the shallows of the lake!

The Rangers had all come to a halt. "He brought down the shields on his own!" Patience Gedeon exclaimed, horrified.

"This isn't fair!" Gudrun yelled angrily. "We're like the National Guard, going up against Godzilla."

"Yeah...well, Tokyo is still standing!" Mayumi answered.

Faust in turn, looked at Ron. "Suggestions?"

"No." He knew too little about the attackers. Ron shook his head. "I won't be much help."

"Sir...we'll take the trolls first. They're highly resistant to a lot of curses. But the curse capsules should take them out. Then we shatter their formation and pick them off one by one..."

"They're charging now!" Kahn yelled.

"Stunners on the wizards...destroy the trolls!" Faust spoke calmly into his broadcaster. "Wolfe Khan....Wolfe?"

Ron looked at Wolfe, who was staring at the cruiser with a horrified expression.

"Galatea..." Wolfe's anguished howl echoed over the grounds and Ron suddenly understood. Galatea must have been on the cruiser.

Wolfe fixed his gaze on Harry, who stood smirking on the barricades that Ron had erected earlier, while the strange trolls and the wizards charged. The air around him shimmered briefly, before he burst into a sprint. He moved several times faster than humans were able to move, going straight at Harry, not caring about the fierce trolls and dozens of wizards that were in his way. He drew his sword and held it in his left hand, while he held his wand in his right.

The lead troll saw him coming and attempted to cut him in two with a swipe of its huge scythe.

Wolfe, boosted by a wand-less speed and levitation charm, leapt over the blow. His jump carried him up and over the troll and he thrust his sword into its skulls when was directly above it. Leaving the sword behind, Wolfe continued on.

The troll's eyes rolled up in its head as it crashed to the floor, as Wolfe nailed a second troll with a killing curse between the eyes.

The sudden defeat of two powerful trolls caused the attack to waver, and Ron knew this was the only chance they'd get to counter attack. The German Ranger Captain apparently had had the same thought, because he ordered the Rangers to attack.

"Incapacitate the wizards, destroy the dark trolls!" he shouted as he lead the others into the fray.

"What are you waiting for?" Ron shouted at the Aurors, who were watching the Rangers leap into action but not moving themselves. "They need help! Watch each other's back, but stay apart." This was a standard battle field wisdom, since a group of people made a tempting target for a Reductor Curse, since a powerful enough curse could kill a lot of people. "We'll go around and attack their right flank!"

"Not alone, you're not!" Charlie yelled.

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As Ron lead Charlie and the nine Aurors around for a flanking assault, Hermione and the Rangers drilled into the enemy formation. The Trolls were the first to fall to a storm of green light, but not before one of the Combat Rangers was hit by a huge mace. The blow caused the Ranger to fly back and crash onto the ground fifty feet away.

Suddenly she was pulled down, and a beam of green light passed right where her head had been. The person lying on the floor beside her fired a stunner at her attacker, and the wizard was blasted backwards by the sheer force of it.

"Watch yourself!" Khan yelled, before scrambling back up.

Hermione looked at the battle. So far only one Ranger had been incapacitated, but by the looks of things they were about to get very ugly. The attackers had been caught off guard by the sudden charge, but they had regrouped quickly enough. The odds were stacked heavily against the Rangers.

Just as the attackers began to take aim, a handful of them were knocked away by stunners that came from the right, and again the enemy formation hesitated in confusion, giving the Rangers time to unleash another salvo that took down another ten attackers. The odds were about even now, and the Aurors merged with the group of Rangers.

"Charlie, watch out!" Hermione heard Ron scream. Charlie had gone to check on the fallen Ranger and he had his back turned. Even as Ron and Hermione aimed at the attacker, she knew it would be too

late. Hermione's intestines turned to lead. They would never save him in time.

Suddenly the attacker flew forward, propelled by a burst of red sparks. The others were shocked and turned their heads to see who had managed to come up behind them.

The Rangers and Aurors used the additional distraction to stun even more enemy wizards, until only a single one remained. The hood had fallen back, revealing it to be a woman. She obviously was having difficulty remaining upright.

In a flash of insight, Hermione recognised her. But before she could say anything about it, a bluish light washed over everybody in the vicinity. Hermione found that her body was nearly completely petrified. She could only move her head. She craned her neck to get a better look. Only Max had managed to block whatever it was that hit them, and he was standing in front of Harry, his wand pointed at him.

Harry laughed mirthlessly. "I'm impressed, Wolfe. I put a lot into the freezing wave, and you can still move. But you're exhausted, aren't you? Of course you are...you're nothing special."

"This is the end!" Wolfe said. "I won't let you hurt anyone else!"

Hermione knew that there was nothing Max could do. He was too worn out. He was only trying to buy the people in the castle more time to prepare themselves.

With a casual gesture, Harry cast a banishing charm that sent Wolfe careening away and smashed him against the Whomping Willow.

"So much for the greatest Ranger." Harry cackled.

"Harry, this is madness!" someone pleaded. Hermione couldn't see who it was, but she knew it was Ron.

"You can still stop this, Harry."

"Stop?" Harry threw back his head. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Because it's the right thing to do!" Hermione yelled, making her presence known.

"Ah, Hermione!" Harry grinned maliciously. "I should have known...you never leave your boyfriend!"

"It that what this is all about? Are you angry because I turned my back on you?"

"Not everything is about you. I've given my life for the wizarding world, and all I got in return was misery. The wizarding world owes me, and I'm collecting." Harry said, aiming his wand at her. "Time to say goodbye, Hermione! Be grateful...now you won't have to marry Ron and raise a next generation of paupers! Avada..." he screamed, but before he could finish the fatal spell, another curse blasted him off the barricade. He tumbled out of sight for a moment, only to come hovering back up seconds later. "Wolfe! You don't know when to give up, do you?" Harry laughed as he aimed his wand. "Then you'll die first! Ava..."

"Before he was able to finish the curse, an angry voice roared..."Expelliarmus!" This curse had been much more powerful than the last one. It wrenched Harry's wand out of his hand and blew Harry into the lake. Hermione hadn't known that Wolfe had still had such a reserve, and she hoped that he'd be able to keep it up, as she tried to use the extra time to concentrate, trying to overcome the freezing wave. But it was no use.

"Finite Incantatem!" The voice bellowed, and a white light washed over them, stripping away the curse that had her immobilised. Hermione immediately got up.

"By Baron Samedi!" Patience Gedeon gasped. The other Rangers were also wearing stunned expressions as they all stared at something behind Hermione. She turned around to see what the commotion was all about, and her mouth fell open in shock. Their rescuer was wearing what looked like a golden, medieval, full-body-armour. It consisted of plates and chainmail, which sparkled in the blazing sunlight. His green eyes held a look of fiery determination,



and he brushed a fringe of raven hair out of his face, revealing a lightning shaped scar.

"By Grindelwald's black heart!" Faust muttered. "There are two of him!"

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A/N: Surprise! Man, I wish I could see your faces. I have waited so long to get to this point, but I didn't want to rush the story. Please review to let me know what you think...and Condor 5, I am not blackmailing anybody this time! J I'm asking nicely.

Bucky, I hope this improves the story for you a bit.

## Identity Crisis

### Chapter 22

Harry stretched out his arm in the direction where his wand was lying. Under the gazes of the utterly shocked Rangers, it leapt up from the ground and zoomed into his hand. He allowed himself a brief smile of satisfaction at his feat. A wand-less Summoning Charm, like the ones Wolfe so often used.

Knowing he didn't have much time before the double would emerge from the lake, he sprinted over to Wolfe, boosting his speed with a Celeritas Charm...also wand-less and unvoiced. "Wolfe...are you okay?"

Wolfe's eyes bored into his own. "It's really you," he stated flatly, gasping for breath.

Harry nodded.

"Then who is that?" The tall Ranger nodded towards the lake, which had started to bubble violently in the area where the double had plunged down.

"Speculum Demon, from the mirror realm. That's where I've been all this time. I had to wait for today's eclipse to get out."

Wolfe's eyes told Harry that his answer had only caused more questions to surface in Wolfe's mind. But he didn't have the time to explain, for the bubbling indicated that the Demon had nearly risen to the surface. From his peripheral vision, he saw his red-faced companion from the mirror realm, panting and clutching his sides. "Go to him. He'll give you a restorative drink. You'll feel as good as new in seconds. Then I want you to go to Professor McGonagall, and tell her to get Godric Gryffindor's sword."

Harry handed Wolfe's wand back to him. "Thanks for the loan, and keep Bill there safe!" he added, gesturing towards the old man. "If I don't win this fight, he'll be able to explain what happened."

Wolfe eyed the old man curiously, before he nodded and stumbled over to him.

Then, fixing his stare on the lake, Harry extended his own wand and slowly began to walk towards it. He knew that he needed to concentrate if he was going to beat this demon. Obviously, it had opted to undergo transformations similar to the ones Voldemort had undergone, and had become much more powerful for it. If he wanted to emerge victorious, he needed to apply everything that he'd been taught in the mirror realm.

The Speculum Demon shot out of the lake like a rocket, and landed on the gentle waves. Then, like some twisted mockery of a holy man, he walked over the surface of the water, towards the shore.

Having performed the Oculus Reparus Charm on himself after his arrival in Africa, his eyes were now sharp enough to see that the demon wasn't actually walking on water, for he could see a patch of ice precede the Demon before it took a step. Harry was glad to see that it was trickery, because he didn't know whether he'd be able to defeat a being that could actually walk over a liquid surface. He immediately realised that that was the reason behind the Demon's show. Intimidation!

The demon sneered after it set foot on solid ground once more. "Well...well. Welcome back, brother!"

"This realm is only big enough for one of me," Harry replied evenly.

The demon shook his head mockingly. "Harry...Harry...Harry! First of all, you can't defeat me. I'm infinitely more powerful than you."

"Funny you should mention that. I'm the one holding the wand."

The Demon began cackling maniacally. "A good thing Wolfe taught us the merit of two wands, eh Harry?"

With incredible speed, the demon's hand had darted behind his back, and half a heartbeat later he had a new wand pointed at Harry. Not just any wand...but thirteen and a half inches of yew that caused a

shiver to run down Harry's spine. He had no doubt what the core of that wand had to be. But that was impossible. Surely the Ministry of Magic had had enough sense to destroy it...Harry shook his head. Of course they hadn't. They had probably been terrified to touch that wand.

"Yes...my associates have been kind enough to provide me with a second wand...just in case. Never thought I'd be using this one, but it turns out it works even better." The Demon chuckled, giving the wand a casual flick that trailed reddish sparks through the air, proving his point.

The implications of the sparks increased Harry's unease. The wand had chosen a new master...an evil copy of himself. The realisation that he could be so similar to Voldemort filled him with dread. Tom Riddle and Dumbledore had both been right, that day that he'd saved Ginny in the Chamber of Secrets. Ginny...Harry shoved her to the back of his mind. He couldn't afford the distraction right now. His opponent was more powerful than any other he'd ever faced...More powerful than Voldemort or Hannibal Skaras.

"We are the same, you and I! We don't have to fight each other. Think of the things we can do together!" the Demon said in a surprisingly gentle tone.

"I'm nothing like you!" Harry growled. "You're the spawn of evil. You have no choice but to do evil!"

The demon grinned. "Oh, but you are like me. I am what you could have been. Ask yourself...brother... why you are doing this...why you chose the path of a hero." He uttered the last word with mocking contempt as he gestured to the castle.

"People don't like heroes...brother!" he continued. "In spite of everything you've done for them, they were all more than willing to believe that I was you!" He ran a finger over the yew wand. "I had nothing to do with the attack in which this beauty was retrieved. I hadn't been in league with my associates yet. But..."

He flicked the wand and several pages on the Daily Prophet seemed to shoot out of the wand toward Harry, who read them carefully, all the while keeping an eye on the Demon, alert for any sudden movement.

The headlines read: Petra Devastator and New Dark Lord, Harry Potter, masterminds attacks in four countries. By Rita Skeeter.

"Imagine my surprise when I read that." The Demon chortled. "And that is just one of many. Accept my truce, and I will show you many more like it. Like I said, no matter what you did for them, it took just one little event to make them hate you all over again. All you have to do is lose your inhibitions and tap into your full potential. Then, you can take whatever you want! We can rule the world!"

Harry waved his wand to banish the front-page image. "Nice try."

"You think I'm lying?" The Demon smirked. "Why don't you ask your friends about it then? Go ahead... I'll give you a couple of minutes!"

Harry swallowed. Even though the Demon was evil spawn, he had a hard time ignoring its words. He knew the Demon was probably telling the truth, but Harry clung to the fact that his own friends would never have believed it. "It doesn't matter what they think about me. The people I care about would never believe those allegations."

"The same people that turned their backs on you? Do you know whose wedding we're at?" The Demon laughed sadistically. "The girl you love is marrying your enemy. Looks like she got over that little crush after all, eh? But you have the power to kill him, and take her and everything else you could want in life! Let yourself go."

Harry forced a smile onto his face. "And what would that be worth? I've seen what power does, and I've seen what power costs. The one is never equal to the other." But deep down, he felt like crying. Ginny had got over him. For the first time, he began to doubt that he could win this fight.

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"We could arm our Curse Capsules and blow them both to bits, just to be sure," Khan whispered to Captain Faust.

Hermione balled her fists and resisted the urge to knee Khan in the crotch. "No! The other one isn't really Harry. Harry's the one with the armour...he's the good one. I know it! He removed the Freezing Curse from us, remember?"

Faust seemed to hesitate. "Are you willing to stake all our lives on that...and their lives?" He nodded to the frightened people at the entrance of the castle. Ginny was visibly shaking in her mother's arms. Malfoy was nowhere to be seen.

Hermione nodded. "Yes!"

Faust exhaled and nodded slowly. "All right! Go up to the castle. I can't use you down here anymore. It's too dangerous. I don't know what will happen if those two start fighting," he said as he gazed at the two Harrys. "That is an order," he added, as he saw that Hermione was about to protest.

Hermione clenched her jaw shut and looked around instead. Ron, Charlie and the Aurors were waiting for her decision. If she'd stay, they'd stay. So she nodded, and the Aurors turned on their heels and went back to the castle while the senior Auror remained. Then Hermione's gaze swept across the stunned bodies of the attackers, and she spotted the woman who'd saved Charlie's life, struggling to get to her feet. She aimed her wand. "Accio...Max's sister!" she said, unable to think of a better definition.

The young woman lurched to into the air and hurtled toward Hermione. She came to a hovering stop a few feet in front of Hermione.

"Max's sister?" Captain Faust frowned.

Hermione nodded. "Very long story. You'd better survive if you want to hear it!" she said, before leaving the dumbfounded German behind as she levitated the woman next to her.

"Wanda!" Charlie cried, as he and Ron rushed over to Hermione.

The woman gave him a weak smile. "Charlie!"

Charlie grabbed her out of the air and cradled her in his strong arms as he, Ron, Hermione and the Auror continued towards the castle. "What's wrong? Which curse hit you?"

"Don't...know!" she mumbled. "Portkey...on my wrist...on their wrist...ten minutes...go back!"

Ron checked both her wrists, and saw the yellow band, pulling it off.

All of the sudden, the woman seemed more alert. "It's gone...I feel fine!" Then she looked at the Portkey band in Ron's hand. "Undead son of a... He set me up!" she began to rattle. "Oh Charlie, I'm so sorry! I knew it was wrong to work for Anastasiou, especially after I met you. I knew he did bad things, but he took me after my parents were killed, and I had no reason to doubt his word, but I knew he was hiding something from me, and I tried to leave him, but he's got Charlie hostage to make sure that I wouldn't leave and..."

"Charlie's right here." Ron frowned, looking completely puzzled.

"Not him...my son." she said, looking at Charlie with tearful eyes. "Our son."

Charlie stopped walking. "I have a son?"

"I was with child when I left Romania," she sobbed.

"But why did you leave me?" Charlie groaned. "You could have been honest, I wouldn't have turned away from you... I have a son?"

"Anastasiou would have found me anyway... and killed you!" she wailed. "He's going to kill Charlie now...give me that Portkey... I have to return; he will kill my son if I don't. Why did you summon me?"

"Come on. We have to take her up to the castle," Hermione said and grabbed the hysterical woman's hand, patting it in an effort to calm

her down. "Don't worry. Everything will be all right...you said your name was Wanda?"

"Actually, my name is Selene," the woman said shyly.

Charlie stopped again. "You didn't tell me your real name? So when you told me that you loved me, was that a lie too?"

"This isn't the time to sort out your love life, Charlie," Ron said. "Wanda...Selene...the reason Hermione summoned you is because you're Wolfe's sister."

"Who's Wolfe?"

"Read Hermione's mind!" Ron said. "I understand you mind readers can gather information much faster that way."

"How...did you know?" Selene gasped.

"The gift runs in your family. You have a twin brother... oh, just read my mind!" Hermione huffed, running out of patience.

Selene nodded and looked into Hermione's eyes, and Hermione tried her best not to blink, fearful that she might break the connection if she did, as she let all the relevant information rise to the surface of her thoughts.

"He...lied to me!" Selene said after half a minute, and started sobbing. "Anastasiou...He killed my mother...he used me!" Her eyes widened in panic. "Charlie...your sister, we have to find her! She can't marry Malfoy! He's a creep. He doesn't really love her. He just wants her as a brood mare. I know, I read his mind on several occasions."

"Did you happen to read how he manages to baffle Sneakoscopes?" Ron asked, looking very interested all of the sudden.

Selene shook her head. "I know he owns a talisman that allows him to do so, but I got that information from one of the other people who'd been watching Draco Malfoy for Anastasiou. I don't know what it looks like."



"Why have they been watching Malfoy?" Charlie asked.

"Because the wanted to recruit him. In fact, I was personally sent to invite him to join Anastasiou's organisation, and he didn't really resist that much. Not that he'd had much choice, but he hadn't seemed repulsed by the idea. He told me he wanted Anastasiou's people to kill Percy Weasley. At the time...I didn't make the connection to you. But when I did, I tried even harder to get away from Anastasiou."

Hermione's heart rate sped up considerably. They had Malfoy now! But there was still that other issue. "Ginny seemed to have been just about ready to cancel the wedding a couple of weeks ago. Then Malfoy shows up at her doorstep and she changes her mind overnight. Do you know how he managed that?"

"Was this the day he went into hiding?"

Charlie nodded.

"Well, he did meet with Cyrus Hague the day he went into hiding, but he was Polyjuiced. Anastasiou's men got the information out of Hague. He sold Malfoy magical sleeping powder with its counteragent, and a ring that had been turned into an enslavement collar."

"Cyrus the Virus?" The Auror...Perkins...asked.

"Hague the plague?" Charlie frowned.

Hermione balled her fists in frustration. Ginny had been searched for such a thing, but she hadn't been wearing any new jewellery. Only the ring that Harry had... She gasped. "Son of a..." Of course...how could I have missed it? We've been looking for new jewellery, but I bet that ring was an exact replica of Harry's!"

"Did you catch that, Perkins?" Charlie growled, looking at the Auror a few paces behind them.

The wizard nodded grimly. "Possession of illegal dark-magical artefacts, including an enslavement ring, which counts as an unforgivable! Ties to a criminal organisation...conspiracy to murder."

"Did I mention that he amassed a small fortune with the smuggling of dark artefacts? He's got it stashed in Petra," Selene added.

No one could comment on that, because a huge explosion took place behind them, rocking the earth. They were blown down by the shock wave that rolled over the grounds. Hermione turned around and saw the monster sneering, its wand aimed at the place Harry had been standing, which was now surrounded by huge dust cloud.

A golden figure leapt out of the cloud as if gravity didn't apply to him, shooting a curse at his monstrous opponent, who dodged just in time, causing the curse to slam into the lake. A hundred-foot column of water shot upwards, forming a brief rainbow as the vast amount of water reflected the sun as it came down.

Hermione's mouth opened in awe as Harry landed nearly a hundred feet away. She'd only seen Wolfe perform feats like that. She'd had no idea that Harry, too, was able to do them.

Harry had barely touched down, before he had to leap aside again, this time to dodge the green beam of the Killing Curse. In mid-air, he shot the same curse back at the impostor, who dodged as well. This told Hermione that neither could merely shrug off the most powerful curse.

Then they both shot the Killing Curse at the same time...the spells connecting in mid-air. A bright beam connected the two wands, and more lines emerged out of the first beam, forming a cage of light around them. Hermione then realised that the impostor was using Voldemort's wand, remembering Harry's explanation about the occurrence of Priori Incantatem when two brother wands were forced to battle one another.

She focussed on the bead of light in the beam, seeing it sit in the middle of Harry and the impostor. Then, the bead started moving towards Harry, whose arms began to shake violently.

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Harry couldn't believe the power the demon had acquired. The bead came closer and closer to his wand, which began to shake uncontrollably even when he held it in both hands. Meanwhile, the Demon merely held his wand in one hand with ease, an evil glint in those red eyes. Then the unthinkable happened...the bead connected with his wand, which began to shake even more, and now he was unable to remove his hands from the wand even if he wanted to.

Smokey shadows started to pour out of his wand and drift upwards... the spells he'd used. Then, another shadow started to come out...more slowly this time. Harry's heart felt like it had turned to ice. It was the image of an old woman in wizard's robes, and she raised her nose in the air.

"I hope you two wipe each other out!" she snapped, her voice sounding distant. The next shadow to come out was a very corpulent and oddly familiar one. No...it couldn't be..."Uncle Vernon?" Harry said through clenched teeth.

"Yes...the fat Muggle!" the Demon said blithely. "Tortured him a bit first."

Harry barely restrained the urge to vomit. Did this mean that Dudley and Aunt Petunia would be coming out next?

"Oh, due to the meddling of our former fellow Rangers, I didn't get the chance to put dear cousin Dudley and Petunia out of their misery." the Demon said as if he'd been reading Harry's mind. "Not to worry, though. Their time will come. But I think I'll kill the Weasleys first!"

"No..." Harry groaned as another shadow emerged from his wand. He recognised Omar Saleh. Then another shadow came out...and another. All the people who had been killed by the Demon and it was entirely his fault. They looked at him with blank expressions on their faces. He wanted to tell them he was sorry, but what good would that do? It wouldn't bring them back...If he'd listened to the caretakers,

none of this would have happened. Tears began to leak out of his eyes as the guilt tore his insides apart. His strength was ebbing. He didn't want to go on. But he had to. He couldn't let the monster hurt the people he cared about.

That thought gave him second wind, and he forced the effect of the *Priori Incantatem* out of his wand. No more shadows came out of his wand, as he forced the bead to crawl towards the Demon...inch by inch. He couldn't break the connection...he had to hold on for his friends' sakes...for the sake of the whole world.

He roared in anger as he forced the bead to slide along the beam faster and faster. The Demon was unable to turn it around, and the bead connected with Voldemort's wand. The shadows of the previous curses came out first. And nothing could have prepared Harry for what was about to come.

He'd never exactly known how Sirius had been killed, or who had killed him. Voldemort had gloated about it, of course. He'd gloated about killing Dumbledore and Hagrid as well. But Harry had never been sure. When their ghosts tumbled out of the wand, one after another, the emotional strain nearly caused him to black out. It seemed they had been the last three people who had been personally killed by Voldemort.

Hagrid's giant shadow loomed over him behind Dumbledore and Sirius' shadows. "Hang on, lad!"

"Harry...what is happening?" Dumbledore asked. "That isn't Voldemort."

"*Speculum Demon...Mirror Realm*," Harry managed to choke out, and the tears began cascading down his cheeks once more. His arms had gone numb, but by some miracle he was still able to hold onto the wand. And now, it was the Demon who couldn't let go.

"You've been to the Mirror Realm?" Dumbledore asked.

"Should've listened to caretakers," Harry grunted. "They told me not to seek out the portal that could take me here. They told me to wait

for the eclipse instead. But I didn't listen. I'm responsible for the existence of that thing! All these people are dead...it's my fault."

"No!" Sirius said sternly.

Harry shook his head. "My fault."

"If you want to blame yourself, then blame me for your parents!" Sirius said, the distant quality somehow not detracting the sharpness from the statement.

"Not...same!" Harry gasped. How could Sirius say such a thing? It had been Wormtail's fault, after all.

"Exactly the same!" Sirius replied. "I made my choice by making Wormtail your parents' secret-keeper, against your father's wishes. But we both know I couldn't have foreseen the consequences. Believe me when I tell you that wallowing in self-pity won't help. You chose to take your own path, as I did, and it had consequences. Face them!"

One of the shadows who had been standing in the periphery of the light-cage, a wizened old witch, stepped forward. She nodded to the demon. "It killed me in Petra... you did not. Do not let our deaths drag behind you, like chains of your own making. That can have terrible power over you. Forgive yourself."

"For letting you die?"

The shadow shook her head. "For being alive."

"Touching!" the Demon roared. "Unfortunately Harry won't have a lot of time to dwell on your pathetic advice because this ends now!"

A great boulder ripped itself out of the ground, and smashed into Harry. Had it not been for his armour, he would have been a bloody stain on the side of the boulder, but the damage had been done. The force of the blow had broken ribs and ruptured organs beneath the armour. It had absorbed some of the force of the blow, but it had been charmed to repel curses, rather than physical attacks.

Harry's wand slipped out of his fingers and the connection broke. Seconds later, all the shadows dissolved into nothingness.

\*

Something wasn't quite right, but she didn't know what it was. And there were two Harrys?

The evil Harry suddenly let loose a massive Reductor Curse, and Harry didn't get away in time. The explosion engulfed him, sending chunks of earth and rock catapulted in the air. The debris rained down and destroyed many of the castle's windows. The shock wave created by the attack blew down the Rangers on the grounds, and some of the people around her staggered as well. Her ceremonial veil was whisked off her face by the wind.

Then she saw Harry rise out of the dust cloud and shoot a green beam at the Evil Harry, who deftly evaded it and returned the attack just as Harry was touching down. Harry again leapt aside, and both then fired at the same time, their spells connecting.

Ginny had only heard about the event, which followed... what would happen if brother wands fought one another. Many lines emerged from the one that connected the wands, forming a strange cage of light.

"Ginny...it isn't safe...we have to go inside!" she heard her mother shout. But the voice sounded distant to Ginny. She had trouble concentrating and her mind felt like it was all fogged up. A thought was lost in the fog, and was trying to find its way out, but the burning sensation around her finger kept tugging her mind in a different direction. But it was wrong! Something wasn't right.

She looked around for Draco. She saw Wolfe scooping a flustered-looking Professor McGonagall into his arms and bolting into the castle at an incredible speed, leaving behind an older man, dressed in what looked like Muggle cowboy clothing.

Hermione, Ron, an Auror and Charlie were coming towards her. Charlie was carrying one of the people who had attacked them...a woman. But she wasn't acting hostile even though she was conscious. That didn't make any sense at all. In fact, she looked really cosy in Charlie's arms, and she was urgently talking to her escorts.

Again she searched for Draco, but he wasn't anywhere in sight. Somehow, she wasn't at all surprised by it, and that thought increased the burning sensation in her finger. It had really started to hurt, causing Ginny to look at her hand. The ring was smoking and turning black.

"Oh, no...Harry!" she heard her mother gasp, and Professor Lupin, standing beside them, howled. Ginny turned her attention back towards the duel. Harry was on the ground and some shadowy figures were dissipating quickly. Harry was terribly hurt, and she couldn't bear to see him like that. She loved him...The fog in her mind cleared instantly, and the burning around finger her ceased. She looked at her hand and saw the ring turn to dust on her blistered finger.

"Harry!" she wailed. Ripping herself away from her mother, she stormed onto the ground and ran towards Harry as fast as her legs would carry her, not caring that every step took her closer and closer to the terrible monster... the evil Harry, who had to be some sort of impostor. Ginny ducked beneath the arms of a particularly large Ranger who tried to stop her and continued towards Harry.

She dropped to her knees beside his broken body and looked into his glazed eyes. "Harry...please don't die," she sobbed, taking her hem of her dress and wiping away the blood was oozing from his mouth.

"Gin?" he whispered

"I'm here. I won't leave you..." She bent down and kissed him on the lips. "I love you so much...I don't know what came over me."

"Gin!" Harry simply repeated, staring off into space.

The heart-wrenching realisation that he was simply delirious and couldn't actually see her drove Ginny out of her mind with grief. He was calling out her name, but he didn't know she was right there beside him. He'd die, not knowing how much she loved him.

"Come here to die?" a cold voice asked.

Ginny looked up into the pale, snakelike face with the lightning scar in its forehead. "You won't get away with this!" she drew her wand out of the sleeve of her dress.

"Oh, and you are going to kill me, I suppose?" the monster cackled. "What are you going to do? Scare me to death with that Weasley temper? Or are you hoping that I'll kill you, so you can join Harry?"

Ginny thrust out her wand. She didn't care if the Curse would bounce back and kill her. She had to try... "Avada Ke...chhhhuurggh."

The monster was making a clutching gesture with its bony hand. "What's the matter, having trouble saying the incantation? A bit out of breath, are you?" it cackled. "I don't think I'll kill you. No...I'd be doing you a favour, wouldn't I?"

Tears streamed down Ginny's face, but she did her best to give the monster a defiant look.

"Expelliarmus!" A dozen voices roared out, and the monster's red eyes widened as a bunch of spells converged on it, making it lose its magical grip on Ginny and sent it skidding a few yards back. But it had managed to hold onto its wand. Ginny glanced over her shoulder and saw the Rangers glaring at the monster.

"Pathetic!" it roared. "Is this the best the Order of Illumination can do?" It extended its wand and shot an unvoiced curse in the general direction of the Rangers, who scattered to avoid it.

The power of the blast threw Ginny down, and she fell next to Harry, who had lost consciousness and was looking deathly pale. He wasn't breathing any longer!



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Disclaimer: Every true LOTR fan will recognise that a certain enchanted object in this chapter is a barely disguised object from this masterful saga. Also, a quote used by a certain character is literally copied from the great J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. Another quote used is literally copied from J.M. Straczynski's Babylon 5. Credit goes to them.

Key to Victory

## Chapter 23

"No...Ginny!" Ron roared as he witnessed his little sister run into the arms of death. He watched as she evaded the long arms of Nathan Kelly and rushed over to Harry's side. The monster was going to kill her for sure! He was going to lose his baby sister!

Ron wanted go after her, but someone held him back. "You won't help anybody by dying!" Hermione said.

He turned to look at her and saw the she was crying. He also saw that she was right. He needed to be alive to work out a way to beat the monster.

"Oh my...look at that!" Diggory gasped, pointing at Wolfe, who was sprinting over to Ginny, holding a small and thin sword that seemed more like an ornamental thing than a real weapon. Ron saw it was Godric Gryffindor's sword and briefly wondered what Wolfe was up to.

Then he looked back at Ginny, who was now swaying unsteadily, facing the monster. She looked like she was having trouble breathing, and the clutching gesture the monster made seemed to be the source of it. Then a volley of spells converged on and struck the monster, causing him to let go of Ginny.

It immediately retaliated with a massive curse that blew a big crater into the ground and sent the Rangers flying backwards. But it never saw Wolfe coming!

Wolfe jumped through the dust-cloud created by the blast and emerged on the other side, catching the monster by surprise. It tried

to aim its wand at Wolfe, but as it did so, Wolfe shot two spells in rapid succession. First his wand released a small fountain of water, which Wolfe quickly turned into ice, causing the monster to slip and lose its aim. Ron couldn't help but marvel at Wolfe's resourcefulness. Then, in blurry motion, he swung the blade up, cutting off the monster's wand-arm before slashing it across the monster's shoulders. The Demon had started to duck, but Wolfe had anticipated this and corrected the trajectory of his strike.

The head fell and made a little bounce, before rolling down the slope and into the lake. The body swayed on its feet for a second, before collapsing too.

"Woohoooo! That's the way to deal with 'em!" a loud, American accented voice cheered. An old man dressed like Muggles used to in the Wild West was jumping up and down, the spurs on his boots clinking merrily. "Godric Gryffindor's sword will slay anything that's evil, no matter how well protected it is by dark magic!"

"How do you know... and who are you?" Ron frowned.

"The man himself told me!" the cowboy said. "As for my who I am? I'm a ring-tail roar'r. I can draw faster, shoot straighter, ride harder and drink longer than any man alive. I ride cyclones and I'm the rip-snortin'est cowboy that ever rode North, South, East or West of the Rio Grande... I'm Pecos Bill." The cowboy said in sometimes-unintelligible words.

"Brilliant, someone who's escaped from St. Mungo's!" Charlie muttered.

"Funny, his mind looks quite sane to me," Selene said.

Ron couldn't dwell on that right now. Harry needed help. He rushed towards the spot where Harry lay and saw that Ginny was poking him with her wand, muttering the healing spells that she knew. But even with his limited knowledge about healing Magic, he feared that his best friend was beyond saving. The panicked look on Ginny's face told him that her efforts weren't working.

He dropped to his knees next to Harry's seemingly lifeless form, a lump forming in his throat. "Ginny? Ginny...is he...?"

Ginny didn't answer. She had stopped her healing efforts and was stroking the side of Harry's pale face. "I can't help him. He's still alive...but I can't help him!" she wailed.

Ron looked at Harry. "I'm sorry, Harry. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when you needed me. But don't you die on me..." He swallowed against the lump in his throat. "C'mon, give me a sign!"

A shadow fell across him, and he saw the distorted image of Wolfe's face reflected in Harry's dented armour. The Ranger briefly laid his hand on Ginny's shoulder, before moving on to join the other Rangers, who had taken quite a few lumps in the battle with the monster. But as far as Ron knew, they didn't have any fatalities.

His gaze followed Wolfe as the Ranger walked among the stunned attackers, digging into a pouch every so often and placing the contents inside the attackers' ears. Then he looked up, and with a strangled cry he raced over the stunned bodies and scooped a soaking wet Galatea into his arms. She seemed unhurt.

Ron looked down at Harry again. Ginny was gently stroking his face again and Ron noticed something odd about her hand. "Ginny, what happened to your hand?"

Ginny's eyes widened as if she had suddenly remembered something that she'd completely forgotten about. She held up her hand and stared at it. "I...don't know. The ring started burning around my hand, and then it turned to ash." Ron smiled despite the gravity of Harry's condition. He couldn't be sure, but he thought the Enslavement Collar, or rather ring, had been destroyed because Ginny had somehow overcome the effect.

"Ron?" Ron looked up and saw Galatea, her wet uniform clinging to her body, and he felt the heat rush to his face. Wolfe was holding her hand.

"What are you staring at?" Wolfe snarled, but Ron was relieved to find out that Wolfe wasn't talking to him. Some of the Aurors had come back onto the field to assist, and had been staring at Galatea.

"This is no time for a wet T-shirt contest! You're distracting the boys," Ron heard Gudrun say, and his concern for Harry enabled him to quickly shunt aside his reaction to the sight of the part-Veela beauty, and the heat in his face drained away.

"Yeah?"

"Move over so I can have a look at Harry."

Ron stood up and gave Galatea some space to work. She opened a bag and began taking out a lot of medical trinkets. She put on some goggles and examined Harry.

"Odd, I can't see a thing. That armour has to be enchanted to repel magic. But I'm not sure I can remove it without hurting Harry even more."

A female Auror shrieked with fright as he pointed to the monster's body. It was standing once more, and Ron looked on in horror as a greyish sludge oozed out of its severed arm, shaping itself into a new arm. Voldemort hadn't been able to do that!

Wolfe drew his wand and shot a banishing charm at it, sending it flying clear across the lake.

"What did you do that for?" Nathan Kelly screamed.

"It's only a matter of time before it re-grows its head too," Wolfe said. "Did you want to be right in front of it when that happened?"

"They disappeared!" Ron heard a high-pitched voice cry. "The attackers, they're gone!" Mayumi said, as she skidded to a halt beside him.

"They were wearing Portkeys," Wolfe said. "I knew Anastasiou might put a return spell on them."

"Why didn't you share that information with me?" Mayumi admonished, her small face reddening with anger. "We would've removed them."

"And miss the opportunity to find out exactly where these guys are from? That's why I put tracers on them!" He nodded at the other side of the lake. "But we have a more immediate problem to solve. That Demon didn't go with them."

"How do you know?" Ron asked.

Wolfe pointed at the puddle of sludge that used to be an arm, a few yards away. Upon being severed, the arm had apparently started to melt. "Because I think I cut off the arm with the Portkey!"

"But where is the Portkey, then?" Mayumi asked. The Portkey was indeed nowhere to be seen.

"If it had a return spell on it, it must have returned to its point of origin regardless of whether someone was wearing it." Gudrun explained.

Ron shuddered. But that thing wouldn't dare attack again now that it was on its own, would it? He realised that it might actually attack again. After all, it had managed to take down the cruiser by itself. "Wait a minute...did you say, Demon?"

"Speculum Demon. Harry told me that's what that thing is," Wolfe said. "I expected Gryffindor's sword to kill it; obviously, so did Harry, but apparently it wasn't enough."

"So what do we do... how do we kill it?" Ron asked.

"First things first." Wolfe said, looking at the puddle of sludge. Voldemort's wand soared into his hand, and he snapped the wand in two, and again until there were four pieces. Then he threw them on the ground and set fire to them. "Now it doesn't have a wand anymore."

"It's coming!" Gudrun yelled.

Ron saw her peering at the lake through her Vision Enhancement Goggles. "How long till it gets here?"

"At the speed it's moving...I'd say five to six minutes," the Icelandic witch said. "It's walking on water again."

"Very well...everyone to the castle. We will defend from the walls!" Faust said. "And have someone search for a way to kill it permanently!"

Everyone began moving towards the castle, Harry being levitated between Wolfe and Ron.

"Maybe Dementor Slayers will kill it," Gavin Carey, who was limping a bit, suggested.

Ron wasn't so sure about that. Lethifolds and Dementors could only be killed by these special weapons, or if they were exposed to powerful Patronus Charms long enough. They couldn't be killed by the Killing Curse, while the mirror Demon had avoided being hit by the Killing Curse. That suggested that it was a different creature. "What about a simple Avada Kedavra?"

"We don't know what effect that will have. It might bounce back on the casters of the curse," Gavin said.

"I'll hit him with it, if I get the chance," Wolfe said.

"What if you get killed?" Ron asked, wondering why Wolfe would be willing to take such an enormous risk.

Wolfe shrugged. "Then you'll know it doesn't work."

Ron glanced at Galatea, and saw that she was very upset by Wolfe's attitude.

"We could inject the Killing Curse into a Curse Capsule, and throw it at him."

"He'll send it right back at us with a Banishing Charm." Wolfe shook his head. "Gavin is right. We should call for a Dementor Slayer."

"But will it work?" Ron asked worriedly.

"I'm all out of ideas." Wolfe said. "It had better work."

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It was over...Harry could feel the life drain out of him. If only he could have seen Ginny one more time, he thought, as his mind slipped out of consciousness, ridding him of the intense pain and taking him back into his memories.

He stood on the rooftop of the only wizarding dwelling in the realm. It had been built by Merlin, and visited by many of the wizards who had travelled in the mirror realm. In the distance, he saw the dark clouds that heralded the arrival of the massive storms that raged through the realm.

"Wish I was riding one of them cyclones in the storm," a wistful voice sighed.

Harry smiled. Pecos Bill loved riding cyclones. That fact had even managed to find its way into Muggle tall tales. But the cyclones of this realm were different. They were temporal vortexes, capable of transporting one through time. And while it was extremely dangerous to one's life to be engulfed by one of those vortexes, Pecos Bill had delighted in doing so. "You've caused enough trouble by travelling through time."

"If I hadn't done so, you wouldn't be breathing right now, partner."

"Touché," Harry conceded. After all, it was true.

"Harry...Harry?"

It was the voice of Merlin's memory. No doubt he wanted Harry to resume his training, for he had to be ready when it was time to face the Speculum Demon. According to Merlin, the Demon had his power



and memories as well being his exact physical duplicate right down to the fingerprints. The Demon was, in essence, an evil version of himself.

"The teacher calls," Harry said, and jumped onto the balcony below. It was a ten-foot drop, but Harry applied some of what he had learned by casting a levitation charm at the last instant. Merlin had taught him for over two months, and his wand-less magic skills had grown exponentially because of it.

Merlin's memory was like a benevolent version of Voldemort's, only it didn't drain anyone's life energy to sustain itself. Instead, Merlin had housed his memory in a special crystal that absorbed the magical currents in the realm. The memory could move about freely, the only limitation being that it was confined to the dwelling. "Ah, up on the roof again?"

"Great spot to meditate."

"I see."

"Well, are we going to resume training?" Harry asked.

The memory shook his head. "There is nothing more I can teach you."

"But there are things I haven't mastered yet. You said so yourself!"

"You have the knowledge, and you have the gift, Harry. You are the most powerful wizard I've ever met. Your lack of mastery comes from the fact that something is holding you back."

"What?" Harry demanded.

"You can only reach your full potential once you find your centre."

"My centre?" Harry shook his head. He'd never been very good at introspection. The Dumbledore brothers had tried to provide him with that through philosophy lessons, and they'd had a modicum of success. But this...

"Finding your centre is the key to unlocking your power. I can't help you find it."

"You can't? Or you won't?"

"Is it what the teacher teaches...or what the student learns?" Merlin's memory sighed and stroked his beard thoughtfully. "I know many things, Harry. The true secrets, the important things. Fourteen words to make someone fall in love with you forever. Seven words to make them go without pain, or to say goodbye to a friend who is dying. How to be poor, how to be rich, how to rediscover dreams the universe has stolen from you." He paused and looked at a butterfly that had fluttered in. "I won't lie to you. I believe I know where your key is."

"I'm open to suggestions," Harry said, starting to feel impatient. "Don't you go all mysterious on me. That's what got me into this mess in the first place, remember? If the caretakers had just told me about that Root of Evil that spawned Speculum Demons, I wouldn't be in this mess in the first place."

Merlin's kindly eyes hardened, and his tone of voice changed, sending chills down Harry's spine. "The reason the caretakers didn't tell you about the Speculum Demon is because they couldn't. They are the benevolent powers in this realm, the ones who try to maintain the fragile balance. The magical currents prevented them from seeing the exact nature of the evil that lurked in the Forest of Reflection. Besides, even if they had been able to warn you, you and I both know that you wouldn't have heeded their warnings. You are too stubborn!"

"But you're not a caretaker. I see no reason why you just can't save the whole world from a lot of trouble and just tell me how I should find my centre, or what it is."

Merlin shook his head. "My reasons for not telling you are quite different. You see, ironically enough, innocence and ignorance often support the most powerful magic. If I tell you where to look for your centre, rather than allowing you to discover it, I would take away the key! This is something you need to work out by yourself. But perhaps, there is a way I can aid you. Follow me."

Harry followed Merlin down several flights of stairs until they reached the basement. Then Merlin pushed a peculiar-looking stone set into the wall, and a hidden door swung open. Merlin lead Harry down another staircase until they reached a grotto with a bubbling pool in the middle. To the right of the grotto, upon a pedestal, stood a golden basin, wide and shallow. A large, golden ewer rested beside it.

"That's Apollo's Basin," Merlin said.

"What does it do?"

Merlin held up his hand, preventing Harry from interrupting him. "First, its power must be awakened. Take the ewer and scoop water out of the pool. Pour it into the basin until it reaches the brim."

Harry complied with Merlin's instructions. "Now what?"

"Now, you must breathe on the water."

"Breathe?"

"Breathe...exhale gently. You mustn't disturb the water too much. Allow it to become still after you've breathed on it."

Harry took a deep breath, and exhaled, letting his breath wash over the surface of the water. It began to shimmer like the thoughts in a pensieve.

"Look into the basin, and be careful not to stir the water..."

"What will I see?"

"Another question I cannot answer, for I don't know. The basin shows things that were, things that are, and things that yet may be. Things that are far, things that are near, things within. But which it is that he sees, even the wisest cannot tell. You will see what you will see."

"Things that are within...? Will this help me find my centre?"

"I don't know. Probably not, but it may point you in the right direction," Merlin said, as he retreated towards the staircase. "I'll leave you alone now. Clear your mind, and allow the basin to show you what it means to show you."

With that, the enchanted memory of the wisest wizard left Harry behind with the basin. Harry looked into the perfectly still water sceptically. He'd never been good at Divination.

He looked into the water and was actually surprised at the image that began to form itself. The image pulverised his heart...Ginny and Malfoy...kissing!

Harry backed away from the basin as if he'd been physically struck...or stabbed. The pain in his heart didn't subside. Then the image shifted to Hogwarts and Harry saw the castle grounds, and he saw that festivities of some sort were about to take place. Suddenly, Malfoy strode into view, wearing the unmistakable matrimonial robes.

The image disappeared as Harry slammed his fist into the water, splattering some on his face to mingle with his tears. Strangely enough, the rage he felt was directed mostly towards himself and not Malfoy. Then the rage drained away, leaving him feeling torn up and hollow inside. Like a part of his soul had been ripped out.

The basin shows things that were, things that are, and things that may yet be. Harry thought. ...may... yet be! Maybe, if he'd seen the future, there might still be a chance!

He looked down into the basin again and saw Ginny look up at him...or down... But no, that wasn't right. How could he still be seeing Ginny? There was no more water in the basin... he suddenly felt disoriented.

No...he wasn't in the mirror realm any longer. Ginny was actually bending over him. She was crying and...caressing his face, her touch like a soothing balm to his bruised skin.

"Gin?"

He heard her voice dimly. "I'm here! I won't leave you..." Her face came down, and he felt her warm lips touch his. "I love you so much..."

"Gin?" he repeated, unable to believe what had happened. Ginny loved him? Not Malfoy? He slipped further into oblivion as his energy drained away. But he couldn't let that happen... not now, not ever, because Ginny loved him. He wouldn't hurt her by leaving. His life... his reason for existence revolved around her. She was his centre.

The realisation was like a crack forming in a pipe with highly pressurised water within. The energy jetted through the crack, filling his entire being in an instant, and he imagined it leaking from his eyes, nose and mouth. It was the most wonderful feeling in the world, reminding him of his eleventh birthday, when he'd found out he was a wizard... his first broom-flight... winning the Quidditch Cup... seeing his best friends finally admit their feelings to one another. But as great as the feeling was, it still fell short of the feelings awakened by Ginny's words... I love you so much...

He closed his eyes as the power stole through his body. He didn't know whether he commanded it, or it sought to heal him by itself, but he could feel the bones sliding back into place and the ruptured organs sealing. Then, all of the sudden, the power began fading away until just a trickle remained. Even this vast power had limits, but that trickle was all he needed... along with time. Time to allow him to heal. For the moment, all he could do was breathe.

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Outside Snape's office, students screamed in terror as Hogwarts rattled on its foundations. The Demon had been successfully kept outside for half an hour by the continuous reinforcement of Shielding Charms, but that hadn't stopped it from hammering the shields with all its might. Professor Flitwick, Bill, Gavin and Doc were working overtime, making Portkeys on the spot that would transport the students to safety in case the castle began collapsing around them.

"I don't have anyone left!" Commander Ironheart said worriedly. "Everyone, and I mean everyone we could spare was sent to raid the

hideouts exposed by the tracers. Recalling everyone to Hogwarts would take two hours."

"All we need is a Dementor Slayer!" Wolfe told his grandfather.

"Are you sure that will kill it?"

"No, sir. But it's all we've got."

"All right. I'll bring it over myself," Ironheart said, and his image faded from the mirror in Snape's office, and Wolfe removed the tiny disc that stuck to it.

Snape examined it from a distance. "Perhaps we should use mirrors for communication as well, Professor McGonagall."

"Oh, Donovan will come to save us!" Trelawney, who had fled from her tower to the relative safety of the dungeons, said dreamily, and she began to check her appearance in the mirror.

"Honestly...we both know it was me whom he was interested in..." McGonagall snapped.

"Just because you were easy! I still can't believe you did that. You were my best friend, and you stabbed me in the back by sleeping with my man!"

Ron was thunderstruck. The decades long enmity between the Headmistress and the Divination teacher was over a man? He glanced at Wolfe, who was openly horrified. And even Snape looked surprised.

"Ladies... we don't have time for a cat fight," Gudrun interjected. "I suggest we all get cracking on making those Portkeys, so we can get all the kids out to safety."

"Right!" Ron said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to find Malfoy!" He'd told everyone who needed to know about Malfoy's secrets. Now pairs of Aurors were hunting him throughout the castle, accompanied by one teacher to guide them. Ron would have liked to have the

better-trained Rangers looking for him too, but they were sorely needed with keeping the Demon out. With their communications equipment and the Marauder's Map to guide him, he could have coordinated a search. But maybe he could persuade some Rangers to part with their ear-pieces so the Aurors could borrow them. "Where's Professor Lupin?"

"Helping our guys with the shielding," Wolfe answered.

"Could you go to him and tell him I'm asking for the Marauder's Map? It'll help us find Malfoy."

Wolfe nodded and handed the mirror disk to Gudrun as he left Snape's office.

McGonagall took charge again. "Let's get to work."

"But I'm terrible at charming Portkeys," Trelawney whimpered.

"Keep the children calm, Sybil. Tell them that your inner eye foresees that everything will be fine," McGonagall huffed, before stalking out of office, followed by Snape.

Ron felt a bit sorry for Trelawney, even though she was an old fraud. He patted her on the shoulder. "It's true, though. It'll go a long way towards keeping them calm. We have to avoid panic."

Trelawney's usually misty expression burned with a determination that almost seemed alien to her. "I'll put on a good show." Then she too, left the office, leaving Gudrun and Ron.

"I take it you'll remain behind to monitor the communications mirror?"

"I'd rather be in the lake, helping Helga fix up the cruiser." Gudrun sighed.

Ron understood. Everybody was doing something, and to Gudrun, this probably felt like she was doing nothing. He also sympathised with Helga, who was trying to repair the cruiser on her own. Thankfully the hull of the cruiser had not been breached by the

Demon's curses, but it had scrambled all the charms that animated the craft. At least, that's what Galatea had relayed. So Ron knew he couldn't expect it to enter the fray anytime soon.

He had a tough time keeping track of all these variables, and he had the distinct feeling that he was forgetting something pretty important. Something was wrong...the pounding had stopped. This could mean that the Demon had given up...or more likely... it was trying to find another way into the castle... which meant that it was going to Hogsmeade.

The man who claimed to be Pecos Bill had told Ron and the Rangers all he knew about this Speculum Demon. It supposedly had Harry's memories as well, which meant that it was possibly going to try to get in through the passage from Honeyduke's.

The nausea that had plagued Ron throughout the day for different reasons had returned with a vengeance. Surely the villagers had noticed the attack. Hopefully they'd reacted accordingly, but he couldn't be sure. "Gudrun, could you ask the lookout to check if Harry's still out there?"

"The pounding has stopped," the witch replied, having caught on immediately. She tapped her broadcaster. "Gedeon...is it still out there?"

A few seconds passed as she listened to reply before she shook her head. "He's headed towards the village."

"Damn!" Ron pounded the wall with his fist. "We have to warn those people that something is seriously wrong here. Keep Wolfe posted on any developments in the Citadel," he called over his shoulder as he raced out of the office and towards the Great Hall, where he assumed the Potions Professor had to be.

Luckily, Snape was indeed in the Great Hall, and Ron came grabbed him by the arm.

"Weasley... you're touching me," Snape sneered.



"Demon's headed to Hogsmeade. You have to warn the people at the village," Ron said, panting from exertion. The training at the Citadel had improved his physical endurance, but racing from the dungeons to the Great Hall would leave anyone winded.

"And what do you propose I do about it?"

"Cast the Dark Mark."

Snape hissed. "Absolutely not! Besides, it might not even work now that the Dark Lord is dead."

"Listen, it's the only warning that will convey the gravity of the situation."

"And it also means that Ministry wizards will Apparate from all over the country. Do you really want them to face that thing?"

Ron bit back a curse. Snape had a point. He needed to find some other way to stop the Demon.

He wracked his brain for an answer, and the answer presented itself more quickly than he'd imagined. He was getting better at this tactical thing! "Wolfe?"

The Ranger, who'd been directing a dozen students to a Portkey, looked at him inquisitively.

"I need you, another Ranger, and half a dozen Curse Capsules."

"What for?"

"We're going to mine one of the secret tunnels into the castle. If this thing has Harry's memories, that's where it will go next!"

Wolfe turned to the rotund Ranger Captain to relay the information, having to go through the chain of command, and minutes later Ron was leading Wolfe and Khan to the statue that concealed the secret passage, and one by one they climbed in.

They hurried forwards until they reached a point far enough away from the castle so it wouldn't be affected by the considerable blast caused by so many Curse Capsules.

"How should we load them?" Khan asked.

"Wolfe?" Ron asked, hoping to get a bit of advice.

"What do you want to accomplish?"

"I want to stop it and kill it."

"Load two with Killing Curses, the rest Reductor."

"Okay. You can set these things to detonate by sensing proximity, right?"

"That would make disarming them very tricky."

"I know, Gudrun taught me all about that. It's supposed to be tricky. I'm not sure exactly what this Demon can do, but I want to minimise the chances he has of disabling the capsules."

"It doesn't have a wand anymore!"

Khan cleared his throat. "True, but it did re-grow its head. Who knows what wand-less magic it's capable of."

"I see your point," Wolfe conceded. "So what are we going to do?"

Ron made his decision. "Forget the Killing Curses. We're going to blow up the whole tunnel. I want to dissuade the monster from even trying this option."

"You're the boss," Wolfe and Khan chorused and got to work.

Ron felt immensely relieved when they blew up the last tunnel that led from Hogsmeade straight into the castle. But at the same time he felt a slight ache in his heart. Any future troublemakers wouldn't be able to use it anymore. "Well, another job well done."

"I'm going on ahead," Khan said, before transforming into a huge tiger and disappearing with leaping strides.

"I didn't know he was an Animagus!"

"Now you know," Wolfe replied dryly, as he turned to head towards the common room once more.

"Hey, they don't really need you up there! Why don't you help me hunt Malfoy? He's a menace within the castle. The Demon can wait for a while."

"The Aurors can handle him."

"You don't know Malfoy like I do!"

"I'm needed elsewhere."

"But he's dangerous. He's been working with Anastasiou! Your sister told us."

Wolfe whirled around to face him. "My sister is here?"

"We were going to tell you, but we had other priorities," Ron said apologetically. "The Demon...Malfoy..."

"Where is she?"

"In one of the dungeons...with Harry and Ginny."

"I want to see her!"

Ron wanted to swallow his words. He shouldn't have distracted Wolfe like that. "All right, but only for a minute. We've got a job to do."

"I know."

"Follow me...I know a shortcut." Ron lead Wolfe through a bunch of corridors and through some secret doors, avoiding all the traffic

crowding the hallways of the dungeons and stumbling upon Snape snogging someone who had to be the Muggle Studies teacher in one of the more secret hallways.

After braving Snape's angry glare, Ron and Wolfe continued and reached the dungeon. Wolfe shoved the door open, causing it to slam against the dungeon wall, earning him a withering glance from Madam Pomfrey and Winky.

Wolfe's gaze searched the emergency infirmary with a desperation that Ron had never seen before. It fell on a bed that was surrounded by a curtain, with Perkins and Charlie standing guard next to it. He could see Ginny's distorted silhouette behind another curtain, bending over Harry and running her fingers through his unruly hair.

"Wait..." Perkins argued before being shoved aside by Wolfe. Perkins wanted to draw his wand, but Ron stepped between him and Wolfe, gesturing that it was okay, and Charlie relaxed, trusting Ron's judgement.

Wolfe grabbed the curtain, but hesitated at the last moment. His hand was trembling, and the anxiety was evident on his face. Then, he gently pulled the curtain away, revealing Selene.

Their gazes met and for what seemed like an eternity, he just stood there, looking into his sister's eyes, while she looked back into his. He finally edged closer, reaching out to touch her, as if he were afraid that she was a mirage that would disappear when he came too close.

"Jasmine!" he whispered as he caressed her hand with uncharacteristic gentleness. "I've found you!"

"Is that my name?" she asked, now unable to hold back her tears. She hadn't even known her true name... her whole life had been taken away from her and replaced by a sham.

Wolfe nodded, and the staring resumed. It was only then that Ron realised why they were doing that. Being mind readers, they didn't need to talk.

Then all of the sudden, Wolfe broke eye contact, strode over to Charlie and gave him a teeth-rattling uppercut that floored him. The fact that Charlie hadn't flown back a few yards, and that he was still conscious and rubbing his jaw, meant that Wolfe had held back considerably.

Winky shrieked, and Ginny stepped out from behind Harry's curtain to see what was going on.

"What was that for?" Charlie complained.

"You knocked up my sister...I had to knock you down. Nothing personal!"

"Ranger!" Madam Pomfrey was swelling like a bullfrog, not unlike Ron's mum when she was hacked off. "This is a place of healing. If you cannot control yourself, I'll have to ask you to I...."

Her last word was drowned out by the thundering sound of the Demon resuming its pounding of Hogwarts.

"Don't worry. I'm not staying," Wolfe said and stuck out his hand to haul Charlie to his feet as if he were a featherweight. "Take good care of my sister!"

The finality to his tone gave Ron the creeps, and Ron knew Wolfe well enough to know what he was planning.

"Max...please, there must be another way!" Wanda...Selene...or Jasmine...sobbed. "I just found you."

"If you face that Demon you'll die," Ron said.

"I beat it once. It doesn't seem to like the Killing Curse. Maybe I can kill it."

"And maybe the Killing Curse will bounce back on you!" Ginny spoke.

"It won't... bounce back!"

Everyone turned around and stared at Harry's bed, open-mouthed. Through the curtains, Ron saw that Harry was sitting up. He swung his legs off the bed and swept aside the curtains.

An aura of nearly translucent energy surrounded him. And his hair...even the fringe that covered his scar...was standing on end, waving gently in as if he were standing in a head wind. "This is my fight! I won't let you take my place!"

It was impossible! Ron had seen that aura before, but none of the wizards who'd produced it had been able to maintain it for this long, Wolfe and Dumbledore had only managed a short burst, before casting a powerful spell. But this was unbelievable.

\*

Harry had never felt like this before. He was pulsing with energy. But knowing that even this power had its limits, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, allowing the magic to retreat into his body. Then he opened his eyes and saw his friends' shocked expressions. "What?"

"You... you were in bad shape!" Madam Pomfrey sputtered. "We didn't even dare to remove your armour."

"I'm better now!" Harry said matter of factly, as he stripped off the dented armour. Then his eyes fell on Ginny. "All because of you!"

"What...but my spells didn't work," Ginny stammered.

"Your words were more powerful than any magic."

"My...my words?"

"I heard you..." He took her hand. "Ginny, I should've told you this four years ago, and I should've realised it much sooner than that... I love you more than life itself. When you told me you loved me... that was all that mattered. I didn't come back because I wanted to live. I came back because I wanted to be with you!"

He cupped Ginny's face and ran his thumb over her cheeks, wiping the tears away. His hand then left her face and his arm slid around her waist, pulling her close, as her arms snaked around his neck. All he wanted to do was kiss those lips that had given him the will to live. He leaned in...

A particularly powerful blast rocked the castle once more, and the shrieks of terror from the students drifted into the emergency infirmary, forming a barrier between his lips and Ginny's. "I have to go!"

Ginny tightened her arms around him, pressing him closer as she whispered, "No..."

"Nothing can keep us apart!" Harry said as he relaxed his grip on Ginny, feeling her do the same, although with extreme reluctance. "I'll be back!" Then he looked at Wolfe and Ron. "Let's go!"

\*

Harry shifted his shoulders a bit as he walked out of the now opened castle gate. The Graphorn armour he wore wasn't a perfect fit, having been borrowed from Mordecai. But the Israeli Ranger had come closest to being Harry's size, so he'd had to part with his armour.

He blinked as the sun's rays hit his eyes. His vision was better than it had ever been, even with glasses. It had to be twenty-ten!

Harry wouldn't have needed this perfect eyesight to spot the demon, though. On the Marauder's Map, it had been a spot marked unknown. And out there it was hard to miss, standing with its arms stretching towards the sky over Hogwarts. The sky that contained a storm that kept battering Hogwarts with magical lightning. The Astronomy Tower and the North Tower had been reduced to smoking ruins.

The Demon wasn't even aware of him. It probably didn't think that anybody would be crazy enough to meet it out here. Now he had to destroy it.

Wolfe had told him that the sword of Godric Gryffindor hadn't done the job. Harry had been afraid of that, since Merlin had instructed him about the physiology of a Speculum Demon. It consisted of millions of cells, each of them being a seed of evil...each of them being a core of its own. The Demon could be dismembered, but that wouldn't kill it. One of those cores would always produce a new Demon to replace the old one...but just a replacement...thank goodness it didn't multiply. That was the Demon's main weakness. The Root of Evil...an agent of destruction, could only produce a single Demon off the imprint of a single host.

He had to destroy it...but how? A Killing Curse? It had undergone most of Voldemort's transformations, and Harry knew that it would be forced out of its body, like Voldemort... at best. At worst... the Demon would abandon the 'ship' about to be hit by the Killing Curse by shedding a cell. Then it would grow again, and they'd have a new demon on their hands in less than twenty-four hours.

The element of surprise... that's what was needed. He looked up at the storm cloud over Hogwarts. The Ministry wizards will have a tough time explaining that away, he thought, as lightning struck the castle several times with incredible speed... That was it!

Harry focussed on that spot within himself... the puzzle of which Ginny had been the last piece. He had to destroy this thing to protect the people he loved. If he failed, they would die! He couldn't fail this time!

The prickling of his scalp told him that his hair was standing on end, and he felt the fringe that covered the scar stand up as well, as every fibre of his being was saturated with magical power. He looked at his hands and saw that they were glowing. Then he turned his attention to the storm. He could see the magic at work... he could see the power surge that preceded the new volley of lightning bolts. He pointed his wand at the sky and waited... waited for the right moment.

The cloud spat down its lightning, but this time it didn't hit the castle. Instead, it struck the Demon...over and over again. Now Harry was in control of the cloud, concentrating every ounce of his energy on the cloud, keeping it spitting its lightning down onto the Demon,



peppering the surrounding area with magical lighting, to prevent any cells from surviving.

He could feel his body screaming for him to stop... but he couldn't. He had to be absolutely sure. The energy around his body was luminescent white, and he saw it was flickering erratically, like a light-bulb ready to burn out. Then he released the cloud and sank onto the lawn... exhausted. His body was literally smoking, and he didn't have enough strength left in him to move.

Above him, the cloud began to dissipate rapidly. He managed to turn his face toward the spot where the Demon had stood. The earth would just have absorbed regular lightning, but this kind of lightning had left a huge crater full of scorched earth. He knew...that the Demon was gone! Now...he could go back to Ginny. He could finally kiss those sweet lips that promised a life of the kind of joy that Harry had never known before.

He just sat there for a while... soaking up the rays of the sun that was still shining brightly... unaffected by the doings of the mortals it cast its light upon.

He looked at the castle as he heard the familiar creaking of the main doors to the castle being opened. He saw a familiar flash of red... followed by another, and another. People were pouring out of the castle now... knowing it was safe to do so. The spot on the Marauder's Map, which had represented the Demon, had winked out.

Ron led the pack of Weasleys... and Hermione. His friend looked worried, and Hermione looked like she'd been crying.

"Harry!" Ron said in a trembling voice. "Malfoy took Ginny!"

\*\*\*

A/N: Blame Ashwinder and Ruskbyte for the cliffie. Their evilness is contagious. ;-)

Specials thanks to all whom have reviewed. Please let me know what you think of this chapter, Oh noble readers.

Victim of Rancour

## Chapter 24

"Ginny?" Harry croaked.

"Malfoy kidnapped her."

"Gone?"

The defeat in his best friend's eyes was a terrifying sight to Ron. "We'll find her!" he said, trying to sound more confident than he really felt.

"Ginny!" Harry collapsed onto the ground and curled into a foetal position.

"Nice work, Ron! Defeating that demon took a lot out of him. You just had to tell him right away, didn't you?" Hermione scolded. "You should've given him some time to recover."

"How is he?" Ron asked, feeling extremely stupid because of his own tactlessness. "Will he be all right?"

"He's gone into shock. But I'm not sure whether it's from exertion or the bad news...probably a combination. We have to get him to the hospital wing."

"But will he be all right?" Bill, who'd been looking on over Hermione's shoulder, asked.

"Yeah, will he pull through?" George asked worriedly.

"That depends."

"On what?" Ron asked.

"On whether we save Ginny."

Someone came running out of the castle, pushing his way past Bill and George. It was Remus Lupin, followed closely by Captain Faust. "Harry!"

"He's unhurt. Just exhausted," Hermione reassured. Then she transfigured a large boulder...debris from one of the towers, into a stretcher and levitated Harry onto it. "Galatea and I will fix him up," she added, before she went to the castle, levitating Harry behind her. Lupin stayed right by the floating stretcher's side, and George and Bill too escorted her to the castle.

Ron kicked a smaller piece of debris away, venting the frustration he was feeling. Malfoy had somehow managed to sneak away with Ginny right under their noses. Witnesses said they had heard a scream, and when they reacted, only Ginny's wand remained. Later, with the help of the Marauder's Map, it had also become clear that Malfoy was no longer in the castle, and they'd found the Priest, stunned, in one of the broom-cupboards. He'd had a reddish spot on his scalp, indicating that someone had ripped out a lock of hair.

"Mr Weasley," Faust called, interrupting his thoughts.

"Yes, sir?"

"Do not call me sir, yet, since you have not been formally asked to join the Order. But that's what I've been meaning to talk to you about. I will be putting in a good word for you, and I suspect I will not be the only one," the German said solemnly. "That flanking assault you led saved lives today. Over half of us would have been killed if you hadn't done that. Instead, we only have one casualty... not counting Harry. We all owe you, and we'd be honoured to have you among us."

"Thank you," Ron mumbled, not sounding enthusiastic about it at all.

"Aren't you pleased?"

"Yeah...but my sister..."

"Ah, of course!" Faust nodded sympathetically.

"Anyway, if you people hadn't turned up as quickly as you did, a whole generation of Weasleys would be dead now. Not that I'm complaining, but how did you lot get here so fast?"

"Janice...Lieutenant Cliff, got a strong premonition about three hours ago. She didn't know exactly where or when, but she saw a lot of death. So we prepared ourselves and lingered near the cruiser. When Gudrun's distress call came in, we were ready to go."

A shadow shot over the grounds and Ron looked up to see the cause of it. "What's that?"

"A Prowler...They used to be employed for scouting, but we mothballed them after we deployed the Orbital Eyes," Faust explained.

The craft, about as large as a Muggle fighter-plane, swooped around the castle once as if to survey the damage, before going in for a landing some fifty feet away from Ron. The hatch opened seconds after touchdown, and Ironheart climbed out, looking a bit confused, but relieved. He walked over to Ron. "I came as fast as I could...and I brought the Dementor Slayer. But it looks like it's all over."

"Not quite," Faust said sadly.

"What do you mean?"

"My sister has been kidnapped," Ron said.

"Your sister?"

"You have my permission to read my mind, Commander. Otherwise it'll just take too long."

"Very well!" Ironheart agreed. "You know how it works right...you have to be thinking the relevant thoughts. So I'll ask you questions every now and then to guide your thoughts."

Bit by bit, Ironheart extracted all the relevant information out of Ron's mind, asking questions every now and again to focus Ron's thoughts and keep them on the subject. Ron admired Ironheart's discipline, even when Ron's thoughts strayed towards Selene...or Jasmine...whatever her name was, he stuck to the subject.

Ironheart was in deep thought after they were done. Something seemed to be bothering him.

"Commander...what's wrong?"

"When you alerted Max to Malfoy's threat, he chose to ignore the severity. And he didn't bring you that special Map either."

Ron's mouth fell open in surprise. "Now that you mention it...But we had quite a bit on our minds. I guess we forgot."

Ironheart seemed doubtful. "Where is Max right now?"

"With his sister, I suppose. But I'm not sure where that is. It may be in the dungeons or the hospital wing. I think the hospital wing, since the threat is over."

"Take me there!"

"Okay." Ron gestured to the Commander to follow him, and Captain Faust fell into step with them too. They passed the Great Hall, which was now about half-filled with students, all of them fourth-years and older, since the youngest students had been evacuated first. To his credit, Diggory was moving about, reassuring the ones who were still a bit shaken up.

Soon they were in the familiar hospital wing again, and Harry was sleeping on one of the beds, with Galatea standing guard over him. Wolfe's sister wasn't there, and Madam Pomfrey's annoyed expression at the rude intrusion into her hospital changed abruptly as she laid eyes on Commander Ironheart. She ducked into her office and slammed the door shut behind her.

Ironheart apparently hadn't noticed. Instead, he walked over to Harry's bed. "How is he?"

"Asleep. Hermione and I thought it would be best for him. We're hoping to have some better news for him when he wakes up."

"He really loves Ginny, doesn't he?"

"His emotions are very intense," Galatea said. "I've never felt despair equal to Harry's." She placed her hand on his forehead. "I still feel it now."

Ironheart nodded gloomily, before his face darkened. "Where is Max?"

"I don't know," Galatea said, looking extremely uneasy. "He... felt guilty after he saw Harry."

"As he should."

That last sentence came out as a growl, and Ron began to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. "You mean...Wolfe somehow knew that Ginny was about to be kidnapped."

"I strongly suspect that he did... though I can't be one hundred percent sure. Max would never underestimate a fellow like Malfoy, and leave it to the Aurors. I know him too well."

Ron clenched his fists as the implication of Ironheart's words sank in. For some reason, Wolfe had allowed Malfoy to take Ginny. "But... why?"

"My... ah... grand-daughter revealed Malfoy's involvement with Anastasiou, right? That's why... Max wants revenge, and he used your sister as bait, not caring that she's an innocent. Something he must've learned from Lei!" Ironheart growled. "The only good news is that he probably tagged your sister. We just have to hope that she isn't brought to a place that can jam the signature."

Ron struggled to stave off the red mist of anger that was trying to take over his mind. "But...that's not right. Wolfe wasn't there when his sister told us about Malfoy."

"He felt guilty about Harry's condition... trust me... somehow he knew!"

The door to Madam Pomfrey's door swung open, revealing the matron. There was something different about her. She was wearing light make-up. "Hello, Donovan!"

Somehow, despite his obvious anger, Ironheart managed to offer her a weary grin that took the poor matron by storm. "Long time...Poppy."

Seconds later, McGonagall and Trelawney swept into the infirmary. McGonagall had shoved herself in front of Trelawney, and was beaming at Ironheart. But Trelawney didn't give up, and McGonagall fell face-first onto the hospital-wing floor. Trelawney had tripped her.

Unabashed, the seer threw herself onto the Commander and hugged him tightly. "Oh, Donovan, it's been too long!"

From the corner of his eye, Ron saw that Faust had trouble keeping a straight face as he helped up an angry McGonagall, who looked about ready to turn Trelawney into an insect.

Ironheart extricated himself from Trelawney's desperate embrace. "Ladies...please. I'm a married man now."

Ron frowned. Obviously, Ironheart knew Trelawney and McGonagall from the days before he'd married, but the married man excuse was a bit weak. He liked the commander very much, but he knew the old man was still a World Class Womaniser. Ron knew that Ironheart had continued to see other women even after he married his wife... part of the reason why she was so bitter and mistrustful of other females.

"Sybil, Minerva...this has to end. You two were best friends before I came along." Ironheart sighed. "Please, bury the hatchet?"

Ron had to hand it to him, though. The disarming grin he flashed at the women made even Galatea turn crimson, making Ron wonder whether there was a male equivalent of the Veela, and Ironheart was a descendant of such a creature.

"Oh...I never could say no to you!" Trelawney sighed.

"I really ought to turn you into a newt for this... but you'd probably get better." McGonagall smiled.

The hum of a Cruiser powering up filled the hospital wing. But it didn't sound right. The pitch was a bit higher than normal, and as Ron looked out of the window he saw that the Prowler was taking off.

Ironheart saw it too. "I should have known... Max! Well, it looks like he's going after your sister."

\*

Ginny looked around groggily as she tried to get her bearings, seeing a door close as someone hurriedly left the room. The last thing she remembered was being stunned by an old man... the wizard who'd been leading the wedding ceremony before it got interrupted. She instinctively tried to reach down to get her wand, but found that she couldn't move her arms much, having been chained to a bed. Not that it made any difference, since her wand had been taken from her as well.

The chamber she was in didn't look like a cell. Some simple carpets lay side by side, covering nearly the entire floor. There was a closet, a desk and a high-backed leather chair.

The door to the room looked heavy and hard to break. Clearly, the room had been designed to imprison people, but the things in the room suggested that the prisoners kept in there weren't facing immediate death. Or maybe they'd just put her in there to give her false hope, and they were planning to kill her anyway.

She'd been lying there for what seemed like an eternity, when suddenly the heavy door was being unlocked. However, the candles



told her that hardly half an hour had passed, unless they were magical candles. The door swung open, revealing Draco Malfoy and a strange wizard, who held the keys to the room.

"Hello, my love!" Draco smirked maliciously. "I hope you're not too uncomfortable."

"Draco...you're with them?"

"Sharp, as always! That's why I chose you to bear my children."

"Never!" Ginny spat, feeling disgusted.

Malfoy just chuckled, and gestured the man to wait outside. Then he closed the door. "Never say never, Virginia!" He sat down next to her, pulled up her dress and ran his hand up her leg, stroking her inner thigh.

Ginny shivered with disgust at his touch. "Never!" she repeated.

"Silly girl!" Malfoy chuckled.

"Yes...I am a silly girl. For not having noticed sooner that you're a pathetic, stinking coward!"

Ginny felt Malfoy's fingers digging into her thigh painfully. "I wouldn't say such things if I were in your position."

"Of course not!" Ginny taunted. "You're a pathetic coward, remember? The slimiest weakling ever to slither over the face of the earth."

Malfoy's other hand grabbed her hair and pulled it hard, sending a jolt of pain through her scalp. "Careful!"

Ginny refused to show any sign of being in pain. Instead she just glared at Malfoy. "You don't scare me! You don't have what it takes."

"We'll see about that!" Malfoy said, rolling on top of her and forcing her legs apart with his knees.

Ginny, being quite limber, spread her legs wide and arched her back, bringing her legs back together as they cleared Malfoy's body. The she kicked him in the face with all the power she could muster, snapping his head back and sending him tumbling off the bed.

He stood back up, blood oozing out of his nose. He looked livid as he drew his wand. "Well, I'll just have you stun you then! No... I have a better idea... I'll paralyse you and let you remain fully conscious. Why deprive you of the memory of the day in which you gave yourself to me, after all! And after I take you, I'll put you under the Imperius Curse, and I'll make you enjoy it. I think I'll have some pictures taken then, to send to Potter and your brothers, so they can all see that you're my little whore!"

Ginny desperately fought to hold back her tears. "They won't believe it. They'll know you used magic on me!"

"Ah, but I certainly won't have to use magic to produce a little redhead Malfoy!"

"I'd sooner kill myself then bear your spawn!" Ginny screamed.

The door swung open, revealing a very pale looking man with classical features. "Mister Malfoy. I'll have to ask you to accompany me for now. There are some very important people who would like to meet you! This can't wait!"

Malfoy wiped the blood away with his sleeve and stopped the bleeding to his nose with a simple charm. Then he winked and blew her a kiss. "Wait for me!"

He left and the door locked again, leaving Ginny to try and think of a way to escape.

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Her fruitless pondering was interrupted nearly an hour later, as she heard a muffled sound coming from the corner of her room. She

strained her neck to get a look at the corner, but she could only see a small table. But then the table started moving, and she heard a child's voice yelp in pain as something thudded the underside of the table.

A little boy no older than five emerged from under it and looked at her with intense dark eyes after he brushed long, red curls out of his face.

"Hello!" Ginny said.

The boy put a little index finger on his lips and came closer. "Be quiet!" He pointed at the door. "The man wouldn't let me in. I'm not supposed to be in here."

"Sorry!" Ginny whispered back.

"Why are you chained?"

Ginny bit her lip. The boy didn't look like a prisoner. Would he believe her if she told him that some bad people were keeping her prisoner?

"Did you make Mr Anastasiou angry? Is that why they've tied you up?" the boy whispered, giving her a frown that looked very familiar. He looked very much like her nephew, Arthur.

She took in the boy, and recognised George and Charlie's stocky build... Ginny's heart skipped a beat. The woman at Hogwarts. An image of Charlie cradling the woman against his chest came to her mind. Charlie's old girlfriend who'd claimed that they had a child together...named Charlie.

The boy gasped. "You saw my mummy?"

"How did you do that?"

"Do what?" the boy asked.

"You knew what I was thinking!"

The boy suddenly looked very frightened. "Please don't tell anybody. I'm not allowed to do that. But you know my mummy...I haven't seen her for so long!"

"Shhh, it's okay!" Ginny said soothingly. "Yes, I know your mummy. I met her today. I'm your daddy's sister. I'm you Aunt Ginny."

"My daddy? The dragon slayer?"

"Only if the dragons were bad and tried to eat people!" Ginny giggled. "Your daddy used to take care of dragons. But he stopped doing that years ago."

"Oh." The boy looked slightly disappointed at this, but his eyes brightened. "So you're my family. Mummy said she'd take me to see my family soon. But Mr Anastasiou keeps her working hard, so she never has time."

"Well, Charlie. If you get me a wand, I'll take you to see our family. You'll get to play with your cousins, won't that be nice?"

The boy grinned from ear to ear. "Really? Do I have a lot of cousins?"

"Yes," Ginny began. "There is Arthur...he's nearly four, about your age."

"I turned four a long time ago. I'm nearly five!" Charlie said.

"Well, then you're the eldest," Ginny said, before continuing with the list. "And Susie and Millie are three, and Amelie is almost two and a half, and Fred is nearly two. And then there are Alroy, Grace, Cassidy and Duncan. But you won't be able to play with them for a while because they're still little babies."

"I have all those cousins?"

Ginny smiled and nodded.

Then boy pondered this for a while, before he began eyeing Ginny apprehensively. "But why are you tied with the chain?"

"These people who are keeping us here are bad people, Charlie. Your mummy has been trying to get away for years. I think that's why they took you away from her. And they tried to hurt your mummy today because she wouldn't listen to them anymore." It all sounded very complicated, and Ginny knew it might be too much for the little boy to comprehend.

"Can you take me to my mummy?"

"If we can get out of here, yes...I can take you to your mummy."

That seemed to convince the boy. "I will get you a wand."

"But how will you do that?" Ginny asked worriedly. "I don't want you to get hurt."

"I can get a wand from Mungo."

"Who is Mungo?"

"The man who looks after me. I've been to many places, but he is always with me. He is much nicer than the others, and he plays with me sometimes. Can we take him with us?"

Ginny shook her head. "I'm afraid we can't. He may be nicer, but he won't let us go either. And how would you get his wand?"

"He drinks a lot of brandy. He's sleeping now, and he won't be up for a long time. That's how I got away to look around."

"Okay. But be careful, sweetie."

The boy nodded and flashed her a grin that made him resemble Charlie, before he disappeared under the table and into the tunnel that had to be under it.

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"I want to know what happened, Vlado!" Anastasiou screamed. "I want to know why all our troops came back stunned, and I want to know why Potter didn't come back."

"Lord Anastasiou?" the guardsman called.

"What?" the old vampire snapped impatiently.

"Von Brandenburg and Mr Malfoy are here to see you."

He looked at the young wizard standing next to Von Brandenburg. Malfoy...he was at Hogwarts. Hopefully he'd be a source of information. "You...what happened at Hogwarts? Why were my forces defeated?"

"Well, it's not like I stuck around to let your forces kill me," the young man drawled.

"Do not mock me...Malfoy. You're not that important! Now speak before I lose my temper and rip your throat out."

The wizard paled and swallowed. "I didn't see the battle, but the way I understand it, a dozen crack troops from the Order of Illumination showed up a little over a minute after your people did. They had a warship that took care of the beasts and some of the trolls too."

Anastasiou brought his fist down on his oak desk, breaking it in two. "I already know that from the men that have been debriefed. But how did the Rangers respond so quickly?"

"How am I supposed to...wait...I can't verify the validity of this, but I overheard fragments of a conversation between two Rangers. They said they were lucky that someone had a premonition."

"Someone had a premonition?" Anastasiou repeated. "I guess that is a possibility." He kicked his desk. "The only variable one cannot plan against." He sighed. "And Potter?"

"He killed your Demon," Malfoy's answer was puzzling.

"What Demon? What are you talking about?"

Malfoy raised his eyebrows as an annoying smirk appeared on his face. "Oh...you mean your Potter? That wasn't the real Potter. The real one showed up and destroyed yours. Your Potter was some kind of Demon...I believe they called it a Speculum Demon."

"Nonsense! Roots of Evil ceased to exist centuries ago."

"I know what I heard." Malfoy shrugged. "Do you have any other explanation?"

"Do not test my patience, Malfoy!"

"Hey, don't shoot the messenger."

Anastasiou huffed. "Very little can be done about that now. And why was the ceremony not finished by the time the attack had begun?"

"A delay!" Malfoy replied, frowning.

Anastasiou read concern behind that frown. Malfoy suspected something. "You believe the delay wasn't a coincidence?"

"I can't prove that it wasn't. But four Rangers were present before the attack began...not counting Granger, because she was the Maiden. She was supposed to be there, but they certainly weren't on the guest list. I think that Weasley may have suspected something about my special talisman, and that he'd called in his girl's friends to expose me." He looked at Anastasiou. "Can they do that?"

"The Order of Illumination has highly capable artificers among its ranks. One of them is the co-inventor of your talisman. So I wouldn't be surprised if they had the means to expose you."

"I think they did, somehow. Because Granger and some Aurors were hunting me while Potter battled the Demon. But I had changed my appearance by then."

Anastasiou smiled at this. "Do you always carry Polyjuice Potion?"

Malfoy nodded. "You never know when it might come in handy."

The door to the chambers swung open violently and one of Vlado's aides came rushing in. "Lord Anastasiou...five of our compounds are under attack. Rangers!"

Anastasiou hadn't felt this shocked in nearly two hundred years. His compounds all over the world were very well hidden. How could one have been uncovered, much less five? "Why?"

"I can't be sure. But these compounds were the staging areas and return points. I think the Rangers have put tracers on the attackers. It's the only explanation I could come up with."

"A good one...you've just saved your own life with it! So none of the other bases are compromised?"

"Highly unlikely, my lord."

That was something, then. But five bases...that was still a costly loss and a major setback. The Mistress would not be pleased. He turned to Malfoy. "Well, it seems like we are quite safe, here."

"So it seems. Where is here, anyway?"

"That's information you don't need to know, Mr Malfoy. By the way, what do you intend to do with your prisoner?"

"Ginny? I need half an hour alone with her. After that she won't be of much use to me anymore. I was thinking that we should kill her. Her death will break Potter's spirit." Malfoy smirked. "For some reason he really loves her."

"He does?" Anastasiou frowned. "Then perhaps we should use her as bait."

"You're the boss, of course. But I strongly recommend that we kill her now and send her head to Potter in a basket. Otherwise they might



mount a rescue. And Potter leads a charmed life, so he might actually succeed."

"Her death will break him? Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. Her mere presence seems to empower him. Kill her, and he will waste away," Malfoy said. "I had actually wanted her to bear my offspring, since her blood is about as pure as wizarding blood can get. But I guess there are other fish in the sea."

"Very well, then she dies." He gestured for Vlado Velkowsky, his most senior wizard henchman.

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Accompany Mr Malfoy here back to the compound from whence he came. Instruct him in the ways of our organisation. I will leave him in your hands."

"As you command." Vlado bowed and retreated from the room. Malfoy merely followed the old wizard out.

"He didn't bow to you!" Von Brandenburg pointed out.

"He is unaware of the proper code of conduct. Besides, I am sure today's raids on our compounds have cost us a lot of personnel. We can't go around executing people for insolent behaviour. Voldemort killed off some of his most efficient and effective servants that way. I do not want yes-men, Wilhelm."

"Does this mean you will dispose of Vlado in the near future?"

"He has lost his edge... but I will present him with some subtle clues to indicate that we've noticed his complacency. If he doesn't change his ways then..."

"And how are you going to break the news about the raids to the Mistress? Will you take responsibility?"

"Of course not. I am not responsible, am I?" Anastasiou said, smiling.  
"And I believe we have found Mr Malfoy's first task."

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Ginny again heard s shuffling sound emanate from under the table in the corner of her room. It had been nearly half an hour, and she'd been worrying about Charlie having been caught. She was immensely relieved to see his red curls emerge from under the table, and he triumphantly held up a long, ebony wand. It wasn't hers, but it would do just fine.

Charlie handed the wand to Ginny, who frantically tried to get good aim at the cuff of her other arm, but there was no way to do that. Her head got in the way of the spell. Quickly, she realised that there was no need to be elegant, and she just pointed her wand at the chain that held her wand arm. "Diffindo!" she whispered, and a link broke, freeing her arm. The rest was easy, and soon she massaged her naked wrists.

Now she had to face another dilemma... the guard on the other side. There was no way she could open the door without him hearing her. She'd have a wand pointed at her face as soon as the door opened. Maybe if she crouched down and surprised him?

Ginny shook her head and rejected the idea as too risky. Then her eyes fell on Charlie, who was looking at her expectantly. Maybe he would be willing to distract the guard on the other side, and lure him far enough for Ginny to open the door and get a clean shot at him.

"Okay," the boy said happily, before scrambling to the corner of the room again.

"Wait, where are you going?" Ginny whispered.

"What is going on in there?" the guard's voice sounded through the door, and Ginny heard him fumbling with the keys. She could allow him to open the door, but there was a small chance that he would evade her stunner. She'd have to stun him through the door. Harry

had told her that Dumbledore had saved his life by blasting through a door to stun Barty Crouch Jr.

But she didn't have that kind of power... did she? She looked at Charlie's hopeful eyes and made her decision. She concentrated on the image of Draco Malfoy's sickening smirk as she imagined where the guard had to be standing..."Stupefy!"

The spell shot out of the wand like a red rocket and shattered the door, stunning the man beyond. She carefully chanced a quick glance out of the room, and saw an empty corridor beyond. Acting fast, Ginny levitated the guard into the room and repaired the door again.

Then she took off her wedding dress and stripped the guard, donning his shirt and trousers. She shrunk the trousers a bit so they fit her better, and did the same to his boots before slipping them on. Then she took inventory of his items. He'd carried the keys, his wand and a pair of sheathed daggers.

She pulled one such dagger out of its sheath and examined it. It had a nasty-looking jagged edge to it. She re-sheathed it and placed it at the small of her back under her shirt while she slid the guard's wand up her sleeve, tightening it in place with the laces.

Ginny glanced at Charlie, who had taken the other knife. She briefly contemplated letting him hold onto it, but she decided against it, thinking that he'd be more likely to hurt himself anyone else. Besides, for some reason they hadn't hurt him, and she didn't want to give them any excuses for doing so. "Charlie...give me the knife."

The boy reluctantly handed it over, and Ginny tucked it into her boot. Then, she shrunk the guard to the size of a pixie and placed him in the closet before donning his cloak and pulling the hood over her head. She opened the door after ensuring that the coast was clear, and lead Charlie out after she saw that the corridor was clear. "All right. Now, how well do you know this place?"

Charlie shrugged. "I don't know it. I just got here today."

"Well, but you've been walking around, right?"

Charlie nodded.

"And have some guards turned you away? Did they tell you that you weren't allowed to go somewhere?"

Charlie nodded again.

It was likely that the places that Charlie had been barred from lead to freedom. So that's where they had to go! "Do you know why?"

"Yes! I saw a door that would take us onto a beach. I saw it in their heads."

Ginny was relieved. At least one of them knew how to get out. "Can you take me there?"

"Okay!" Charlie said, and held out his little hand. Ginny smiled and took it, and they set off through the maze of corridors that lead to the place where they would make a break for freedom.

They managed to proceed unchallenged for a full ten minutes, before Ginny heard the sounds of alarm emanating from the corridors behind her. "Charlie, we have to hurry!"

The boy began to jog, pulling holding Ginny tightly as if he were afraid to leave her behind. "Nearly there!"

They rounded a final corner, surprising the wizard and witch who guarded a set of stairs that lead up to a trap door.

"Stupefy!" Ginny screamed, and the red beam hit the witch squarely in the chest, knocking her out.

But before Ginny could take aim at the wizard, he shouted his own stunner.

She pushed Charlie away and managed to leap aside, causing the beam to pass though her cloak. The wizard was skilled, however, and

his next hex... Expelliarmus, hit in her midriff, sending her crashing into the wall as her wand was ripped out of her fingers.

The impact against the wall knocked the wind out of her, and the pain in the back was incredible. She groaned and sank to the ground, as the wizard stood before her, with his wand pointed at her forehead.

"Stu...arrgh!" the wizard cried, unable to finish his stunning spell. Little Charlie had jumped onto him and sunk his teeth into the wizard's hand, causing him to drop the wand. He backhanded Charlie in retaliation, and the boy fell on the floor, crying at the top of his lungs.

The wizard bent over to pick up his wand, but Ginny had got her breath back, and a wand up her sleeve. She twisted her wrist and shook her arm, sending the wand sliding out. "Stupefy!" Her anger at the wizard for having struck her nephew fuelled the spell to such a degree that the wizard flew back fifteen feet as the spell hit him.

Then she crawled over to Charlie and took him in her arms, comforting him. "Shhh...it's okay."

The boy's crying lessened and stopped, save for the errant sob or two.

Ginny examined his face as saw that his eye was swelling. But she'd have to fix it later. "Come on...we have to get out..."

"You're not going anywhere!" an all too familiar voice drawled. "Expelliarmus!"

Ginny's second wand flew out of her hand, but the spell had caught her in the shoulder so she was able to twist with the impact, preventing her from crashing into the wall again. Instead, she scooped Charlie off the floor and made a break for the stairs, zigzagging to try and avoid being hexed. But unfortunately, Malfoy was better than Harry and her brother had given him credit for, and she felt her legs stiffen as she was hit by the Leg-locker Curse. She turned as she fell, to avoid landing on top of her nephew and landed painfully on her already hurt back.

Malfoy smirked triumphantly as he placed his foot on her belly. "Here you are...at my feet!"

"Stop playing around and kill her!" an old wizard who'd accompanied Malfoy shouted.

"Stupefy!" a new, deep voice thundered, and a thick and intense red beam hit the old wizard, sending him flying down the corridor, past Ginny and Malfoy.

Malfoy whipped around and stooped low, to make his profile smaller, levelling his wand at the new enemy. A Ranger!

The Ranger's eyes hardened with fatal understanding as he saw Malfoy's wand, knowing there was no way he could avoid it.

"Avada Keda..." Malfoy's breath caught in his throat, and he looked down.

Ginny had used Malfoy's distraction to draw a dagger. Then, knowing that the Ranger only had seconds to live, she blindly drove it upwards, twisting it as she felt it connect.

Blood was soaking Malfoy's robes as he still looked down in shock

"Expelliarmus!" The Ranger roared.

Malfoy seemed to defy gravity as he flew down the length of the corridor, before he crashed into the wall at the end, tracing a vertical trail of blood along it.

Ginny then turned to look at the tall Ranger... she recognised him. "Ranger Wolfe?"

The Ranger waved his wand and Ginny felt her legs loosen up. He stared at her intensely. "You saved my life."

"You saved mine...we're even. How did you find me?"

"I'll tell you when we're out of here..." His eyes softened as he noticed the boy. "Charlie?"

Charlie rushed over to Ginny and hid behind her.

"It's okay...Charlie. He's a friend...he's your Uncle Maximilian."

Charlie eyed Wolfe with wonder. "Is he daddy's brother?"

"No...he's your mummy's brother!"

Wolfe's expression closed up again. He strode over to the stunned old wizard and picked him up, slinging him over his shoulder. "Grab Charlie. We need to find a way out of here."

Ginny pointed to the stairs. "That's a way out. Charlie says that it leads to a beach."

"How does he know?"

"He read it in a guard's mind...and do we have to take that scum with us?" She nodded at the old wizard.

"This man is a higher-up within Anastasiou's organisation. He's a wellspring of information. Let's go!"

They climbed the stone steps and Wolfe blasted the trapdoor away as they reached it. They walked a short distance down a rocky path, and soon, they were standing on a small beach...stars twinkling overhead.

"Where are we?" Ginny asked.

"Pohnpei...Micronesia. Half of that base is actually under the sea. I completely missed this entrance. But I found the one I used on one of the artificial islets. Who would have thought that Anastasiou would use Nan Madol as a location for a base...ah...here's our ride."

A small craft appeared out of thin air and landed on the beach. Wolfe quickly put the old wizard into an enchanted sleep, before shoving

him into small a cargo compartment. Then he helped Ginny into the craft and strapped her in, since her back had been hurting badly. The craft was a two-seater, so Charlie had to sit in Ginny's lap.

Then a few angry shouts came out of the forest, and Wolfe quickly jumped into the craft. "Sorry, as much as I'd like to stay and exterminate you all..." He lowered the hatch, and seconds later they took off into the starry night... towards freedom.

As they soared through the night sky, and Charlie looked out of the viewport, fascinated by the sight, Wolfe surprised Ginny with a question. "So...do you think that Malfoy will ever adapt to his new life as a eunuch?"

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A/N: I hope you've enjoyed this chapter, oh noble readers. Remember my ego likes reviews.

To al the people who screamed for Malfoy's death...well, I didn't kill him, but I hope this will satisfy you for now. Let me know what you think. :-)

Finally, Casual Reader and Viva, yes, Harry's hair standing on end was partially inspired by DBZ. Clever observation.



## Responsibility

### Chapter 25

Ginny looked down and saw the ocean zip by underneath her. Above her she saw the twinkling stars. "How fast are we going?"

"As fast as we can," Wolfe replied

"Aren't we going back to Hogwarts?"

"It would take hours, even at our top speed. And we don't have enough juice to make it there. I burned off one third of the potion reservoir to get to you in time. I used the Portkey Mode of the craft... instant transportation."

"One-third? But that means you still have two-thirds!"

"Commander Ironheart also used Portkey Mode to go to Hogsmeade. So I only had one-third left, and I didn't want to risk it. We don't want to run out of potion. Besides, Nomad Island is very close by this week. It's usually in the South Pacific anyway, because there the ocean is at its deepest. Don't worry. I'll send word that you're okay as soon as we reach the Citadel."

"Thank you!" Ginny said, absently running her hand through her nephew's soft curls. "So, this craft uses some kind of potion like Muggles vehicles use fuel?"

"Not directly. It serves more like a conductor for the magic that animates the Prowler. The more magic the Prowler uses, the more quickly the potion degenerates, and has to be replaced."

"I see!" She'd been wondering how an object of that size could be animated like that. "Otherwise you'd have to reinforce animation charms far too often, for something this big. This isn't a broomstick!"

"You seem to know a lot about the subject." Wolfe said, sounding mildly impressed.

"Well, I got three O.W.L's for Charms. And I used to watch my dad enchant all sorts of stuff while when I was little." Ginny smiled. Her father had been hopeless at it, but that was how she got interested. "I also did some enchanting of my own. I gave Ron's old Shooting Star an overhaul a couple of summers ago. I had it flying almost as well as a Cleansweep Six.

"Impressive." Wolfe grunted.

"Thank you. A representative from Comet Trading Company thought so too." She grinned as she remembered that day in the war. She'd seen a wizard fleeing from a pair of Dementors, and she'd pulled him on her broom, saving his life. He'd been shocked to see that a Shooting Star had managed to carry both of them at a decent speed. After Voldemort's demise, the wizard had visited her at Hogwarts in her seventh year, and he'd offered her a job at the company. But she'd declined, since broomsticks would have reminded her of Quidditch, and Quidditch would have reminded her of her dead brother and a certain green-eyed Seeker. Working to charm objects would also have reminded her of her father, and at the time she hadn't been ready to deal with those painful memories yet.

"But you became a nurse instead."

"Yes. I wanted to heal people... and myself, I guess. But thank you for rescuing me. Malfoy would have killed me if you hadn't shown up when you did."

"Don't thank me," Wolfe mumbled.

"Don't be so modest."

"Modesty has nothing to do with it. I'm afraid I was the one who allowed Malfoy to take you in the first place."

"What... How?" Ginny frowned.

"I ran into Malfoy when I took Professor McGonagall to get the sword. He was Polyjuiced, but I briefly read his thoughts... you know about my gift... right? I knew he was trying to find a way to kidnap you.

When I placed my hand on your shoulder when you were with Harry, out on the grounds, I also placed a tracer on you. That's how I found the location of the base... and you."

He paused to gather his thoughts, and Ginny was too stunned to say anything.

He continued. "I had hoped that Malfoy would have taken me to Anastasiou, so I could finally kill him. That's why I did it. But then I saw Harry's reaction when he learned that Malfoy had taken you... I saw his thoughts. He felt exactly what I imagine I would feel if Galatea were taken from me. That made me think, and I realised what a horrible thing I had done.

"You were innocent, but all I had cared about was a chance to get revenge. My mother must be turning in her grave because of what I've done," he said gloomily. "I hope you can forgive me... someday."

Ginny wanted to get angry, but for some reason she found that she couldn't. In a way, she could relate to what Wolfe must have been feeling. Harry must have been in the same state of mind when he'd cursed Ron. "A thirst for revenge can make people do terrible things. Nobody got hurt...just forget about it. I'll forgive you, if you promise never to do it again."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"This is what I've been raised to do. It's part of my mind... my soul. As soon as we land, I'll resign from the Order. I can't risk endangering an innocent for my thirst for revenge again. Besides, my grandfather probably knows what I've done. I'll be dishonourably discharged." Wolfe's voice cracked. "Galatea... I bet she won't have anything to do with me now..."

The craft slowed down and plunged into the sea. Ginny thought about Wolfe's predicament as they dived deeper and deeper into the South Pacific. Wolfe hit a few keys on his console, and suddenly they were

surrounded by light. They descended into the light and ended up inside a huge dome.

"Welcome to Nomad Island, Miss Weasley."

It was still day inside the dome, and Ginny marvelled at the sight below. It was magnificent... a wonderful place to live!

Wolfe piloted the craft down toward a stronghold on top of a hill and circled around the hill, before flying straight into a cliff that stuck out from its slope. Ginny knew that it wasn't a real cliff. It was an illusion, like the one that obscured platform nine and three-quarters from Muggles. Seconds later, they found themselves in a cavernous bay and Wolfe gently landed the craft.

The bay was largely empty, save for two men. Both were older men... one was wearing a tool belt, and the other was wearing a Ranger uniform similar to the one the Rangers had worn at Harry's funeral. It bore three gold pips, indicating that he held a high rank. His face, which would otherwise have been devastatingly handsome, was now twisted with fury.

Wolfe first helped Ginny and Charlie out of the Prowler, before walking over to the two men and stiffly offering a salute, leaving Ginny behind with Charlie in her arms. He was still out cold... a sound sleeper, just like her she and her brothers.

"Sir... I..." Wolfe began, but the commanding Ranger raised his hand to silence him.

"Shut up... I'll deal with you later!" Then he walked over to Ginny, and his anger melted into worry. "Are you okay, Miss Weasley?"

"Sir...Wolfe knows he made a mistake... he's sorry..." She paused as she recognised the similarity between Wolfe and this old Ranger. They had the same good looks, but this man oozed a sort of charm that was utterly absent in Wolfe. Could he be...?

"Yes, he's my grandson, although he didn't inherit his attitude from my side of the family."

"So you're all mind-readers?" Hermione had told her about Wolfe's gift. So it ran in the family?

"Yes, mind reading is hereditary." The man nodded.

Ginny groaned. "My back hurts... can you take him from me for a second?"

The senior Ranger smiled warmly. "Of course." He gently took over the boy, who chose that moment to wake up.

Charlie rubbed his eyes and got a panicked look in his eyes as he saw the stranger who was holding him. But he relaxed as he saw Ginny, who was rubbing her lower back. The he looked the Ranger. "Who are you?"

"That's your mummy's grandfather." Ginny answered.

The man smiled. "I'm Donovan Ironheart. You've grown since your mummy last saw you." He turned to Ginny. "I linked with Jasmine. I saw him through her mind. Anastasiou has been holding him hostage to keep her in line. How did you find him?"

"He found me, actually. He saw his mother in my mind, and assumed I was friendly. I couldn't have broken out without him."

"So...you've inherited the gift?" he said, tousling Charlie's hair. "That's unexpected."

"How so?" Ginny asked

"Well, it usually skips at least one generation. My great-grandmother was the last one in my line before me. But I digress. We'll have time to discuss this later." He put Charlie down. "I have to deal with Max!"

"Sir... please... don't kick him out of the Order. He knows he made a mistake by letting Malfoy take me. He came to find me immediately...that's got to count for something."

"Ginny!"

She had barely turned around when Ron slammed into her, taking her off her feet and whirling her around in a bear hug.

"You're okay!"

"Not if you don't let go of me soon!" Ginny groaned.

Ron relaxed his grip. "Sorry...but what happened?" A muscle in his jaw twitched as he noticed Wolfe, standing stock-still as his grandfather paced around him.

"He knows that allowing Malfoy to take me was wrong. I forgave him! He saved my life when he turned up," Ginny said, feeling she had to defend Wolfe.

"He's the one who endangered your life in the first place."

"Ron... if you forgave Harry, you have to forgive Wolfe."

"No! Harry's situation was different. Harry had just lost a few people who'd been very close to him. Harry snapped in a fit of rage. What Wolfe did was deliberate."

"He wanted a chance to avenge his family's death, Ron. I know what he did was wrong, but more importantly, he knows it too! Come on, Ron. There's a good reason why he's Hermione's friend, right?" Ginny said as she gave Ron her 'little sister he just can't say no to' look. She used it sparingly, but when she did it would always work, and even now Ron's jaw relaxed.

"I'll need some time!"

"Fair enough," Ginny said, and gave her brother a hug. Then she turned attention to Ironheart and Wolfe.

Ironheart sighed. "Well, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"Sir...I accept full responsibility..."

"Shut up!" Ironheart snapped. "I bet you've been practising that little total responsibility speech throughout your trip back here... haven't you?" He began to pace around his grandson. "You would very eloquently explain how you're a danger to yourself and to others, and you'd offer your resignation. Well, am I right?"

"You're mocking me, sir!" Wolfe replied stiffly

"Oh, I haven't even begun to mock you. Drop your pants!"

"What?"

"That would be, I beg your pardon, Commander!" Ironheart barked. "Now do it!"

Wolfe fumbled with his belt and his pants dropped a moment later.

Ginny could only try to imagine the look on Wolfe's face, since he had his back towards them. But she knew he had to be incredibly embarrassed. She also wondered why on earth Ironheart had him drop his pants? Was he going to spank Wolfe?

"Now, you were saying?" Ironheart said calmly. "I'd like to see you try and deliver your little speech like this."

"Sir...p...permission to pull my pants up...this is ridiculous," Wolfe stammered.

"About as ludicrous as the notion that your resignation means that you're taking responsibility for your actions. You're not taking responsibility by resigning, you're avoiding it. Taking responsibility would mean sticking around and earning your friends' confidence and respect again."

"But...I put an innocent girl in danger. You have to dismiss me!"

"That is my decision to make," Ironheart barked. "You were in line for promotion...an impressive feat, considering the fact that it usually takes six years to advance. Consider that promotion cancelled. You

will have to start over again from the Fifth Class. Now get out of my face. I don't want to see you for a while...and pull up your pants...Gudrun is enjoying the view too much!" He smirked in Ginny's direction, and Ginny turned around and saw the witch who'd stayed overnight at the Burrow, and who'd been at the ceremony.

"Hmmm, that arse could bounce a quarter into orbit!" she said, ogling Wolfe, who quickly pulled up his pants, blushing profusely. "Now if you'll excuse me..." Gudrun pocketed something and hurried away.

Ginny saw Ron tense up once more as Wolfe approached them. "Ron?"

Her brother obviously didn't trust himself to speak just yet, and acknowledged Wolfe with a brisk nod. Ahh, Ron's starting to learn to control his temper when necessary. Good for him.

Wolfe clasped his hands behind his back. "Listen... I... I know that no words of mine will change the way you feel about me right now. But I want you to know that I'm truly sorry."

"Sorry?" Ron erupted, unable to contain himself any longer. "Do you know what happened to Harry when he found out that Ginny was gone? Do you know what you did to my family and me, and Hermione? Do you how they reacted when they found out about your selfish decision?"

"I'll find out soon enough," Wolfe said miserably.

"Yes, you will. My God, man! I knew you had some problems, but I never thought you'd allow this to happen. I'm disappointed in you, Wolfe... and Hermione even more so. And Galatea... oh Lord, how could you do this to her? She worships you!"

"How can I make things right?"

"I think your grandfather's suggestion was a good idea. You'll have to earn my trust again. And you need to take a break from things to get some perspective. Take Galatea with you... if she'll still have you."



"Is it that bad?"

"Worse!" Ron sighed.

Wolfe nodded slowly. "I guess I deserve it. And Harry... will he be okay?"

"Now that Ginny's okay... yeah."

"Good."

Ginny slowly let out the breath she'd been holding. That hadn't gone too bad. Then a tugging at her trousers reminded her of her charge. She'd completely forgotten about him after Wolfe's dressing down. "Oh, I'm sorry, Charlie. Charlie... this is your Uncle Ron!"

A look of pure astonishment appeared on Ron's face. "This is Charlie's son? But how did he...?"

"I guess Wolfe's decision was a blessing in disguise as well. If he hadn't allowed Malfoy to take me, we may never have found Charlie. He'd been brought to the same compound earlier that day."

"Are you a dragon slayer too?" Charlie asked.

Ron gave Ginny a confused look. "What did you tell him?"

"I didn't tell him anything." Ginny giggled. "He's got it in his mind that Charlie was a dragon slayer. His mum told him that Charlie used to work with dragons, but I think the dragon slaying business is firmly lodged into his mind. Don't worry though, he'll grow out of it."

Ron groaned all of the sudden and shook his head.

"What's wrong?"

"I just realised something. Now that Charlie's out of the way, I'm next on Mum's hit list. Now she's going to pester me about grandchildren."

Ginny chuckled. "I don't think Hermione wants children yet."

"Neither do I," Ron said, getting a mischievous glint in his eye. "Of course, Mum will want some Potter grandchildren too..."

Ginny winced. "Right!"

"So... what other surprises did you two bring? You didn't happen to bring Malfoy too, did you? Blimey, I'd love to cut his balls off and shove them up his arse."

Wolfe chuckled. "Too late for that... Ginny beat you to it... at least, the first part."

"Huh? What's he talking about?"

"Malfoy had me lined up for a Killing Curse, when Ginny cut off his branch of the family tree! He can forget about offspring. No amount of magic will restore that."

"Ginny!" Ron said in a mixture of awe and disbelief. "You cut his balls off?"

"Well, I just stabbed him and twisted the dagger." Ginny blushed. "I'm not sure if I cut anything off."

Wolfe slapped his forehead. "Velkowski... I forgot all about him!" He ran over to the Prowler and opened the cargo compartment, pulling out a limp body and put the Mobilicorpus on him to move him. "I'll put this guy away first!" he said, and guided the prisoner out of the bay.

Ginny became aware of her back again. "Ron... is there anyone here who can look at my back? I hurt it a bit."

"Uh, okay, I'll take you to the Medical wing!"

\*

Hermione, Madam Pomfrey and Galatea anxiously waited for the antidote to the sedative Harry had been given to take effect. His

breathing quickened, and his cheeks gained colour. A few minutes later, his eyes fluttered open. "Ginny?"

"Ginny's fine. She's safe... she's been rescued. How do you feel?" Hermione answered.

"Ginny's safe?"

"Yes...she's at the Citadel with Ron. He went ahead with Gavin's Portkey. The Notus is here with some other Artificers to help fix up the War Cruiser. We're taking it back to the Citadel."

"How long was I unconscious?"

"We let you sleep for six hours. You were exhausted," Hermione said, relief pouring through her. "What did you do to that Demon? You were spectacular!"

"Something Merlin taught me in the Mirror Realm. But I wasn't able to do it until I faced off with the demon. You see, all these years I've been blocked, like that time I couldn't learn the Summoning Charm?" he said, referring back to their fourth year. "But this was much worse, and Merlin said that the only way to unlock my full potential..."

"Wait...hold on, Mirror Realm...Merlin? The Mirror Realm is a place of myth...meaning that it did exist, of course. But all the portals had been believed to be destroyed."

Harry smiled sheepishly. "I'll begin at the beginning, all right?"

"Hold on...I'll get Professor McGonagall and Professor Chubb."

"Who's Professor Chubb?"

"Andy Chubb, you know...Agatha Chubb's son? Agatha Chubb, who is the leading expert in ancient wizarding artefacts? Andy is the new History of Magic Teacher. Binns is still here, but he found it difficult to keep up with current affairs, so Professor McGonagall attracted a living teacher for that. I'm sure Professor Chubb would like to make notes on your experiences in the Mirror Realm."

"Well, where's Pecos Bill? He's spent much more time there than I have!"

Hermione barely kept her shock at bay. "You mean he really is Pecos Bill? But that's impossible! If I remember my History of North American Wizards properly, the last time he was seen was by a Menominee shaman in 1861. He was riding a cyclone onto Lake Michigan."

"Wow, I didn't even know he was a wizard until they told me about it."

"Who?"

"The caretakers!"

Hermione rubbed her forehead, trying to massage her brain into working better. "Madam Pomfrey, could you please send for Professor McGonagall and Professor Chubb?"

"Of course, dear!" The matron nodded.

"And ask Professor Chubb to prepare himself to take notes."

"And find a way to summon Pecos Bill too," Harry added. "And I think Professor Snape would like to be here as well... and Lupin... and Flitwick too. I think all of them might be interested in some parts of the story. Oh, I guess you might also want to bring in Captain Faust... if he's still here."

Madam Pomfrey gave him a sour look. "Why don't I just summon everyone to the Great Hall?"

Harry blushed. "I'm sorry to inconvenience you like this. Please?"

"Oh, all right!" the matron huffed as she went to her office.

The teachers, Faust, and Pecos Bill dribbled into the hospital ward during the next few minutes, and after everyone had settled down, Harry finally began telling his story.

He told them about the underground river in India, and how a caretaker had nursed him back to health. Then he explained what the caretakers were, that wands didn't work well in the Mirror Realm, and about the Temporal Vortexes, explaining how Bill rode those and travelled through time. Then, with visible reluctance, he told them about his journey through the Realm to get to the portal... and how the many caretakers had advised him from entering the Forest of Reflection, where the portal was located.

"Another denizen of the Forest was the Root of Evil. When it sensed my approach, it fashioned itself into what I imagined a portal would look like. It drew me in me in, and created a Speculum Demon. The process had left me without any strength, and the Demon had been about to kill me, when Pecos Bill here showed up. He took me to Merlin's dwelling where they..." Harry paused. "Where he and Merlin patched me back up..."

"Merlin is still alive?" McGonagall gasped.

"Oh no, Merlin's quite... quite dead, sweetheart! But his memory still lives in his dwelling. Many other wizards who've visited the Realm have stayed there," Pecos Bill said.

"Including Godric Gryffindor." Harry pointed to the armour with the dented chest plate. "That's his armour. He left it there. It works wonderfully against all spells except the Killing Curse, but it doesn't absorb physical damage any better than normal early medieval armour."

"What about Mr...Bill?" Snape frowned. "He looks very much alive to me. But wizards don't live to be two hundred years old."

"Let me explain, partner!" the cowboy said, and leaned back into the chair he'd been occupying. "This here is the year 2001, am I right? Well, by my reckoning I've only been in the Mirror Realm for sixty-three years. So for me, it would be 1924."

Hermione shook her head. It didn't add up. "True, but that means you'd be over one hundred and twenty-years old."

"One hundred and twenty-seven!" Pecos Bill beamed.

"Exactly, but you look like you're in your nineties," Hermione observed. "Does the Mirror Realm slow down the ageing process?"

"No, it's a draught that the caretakers brew. It makes your hair grow like mad!"

"So that's the whole story." Harry sighed.

Just as he said that, Hermione caught Pecos Bill glancing at Harry with an odd look.

"Mr, Pecos Bill..." Professor Chubb said. "I would love to write down all your stories sometime."

Pecos Bill's odd look vanished and was replaced by a cheerful expression. "That'd be great, 'cause I've been wanting to tell my story for years!"

Hermione smiled. The boastful cowboy had been upset about Harry telling them that there was no more to the story. "Wow, Harry. That was quite a story!"

Harry nodded. "And before I forget...Bill, where's the bag?"

"Oh, I left it in the fair Headmistress' room."

McGonagall's attempt to look scandalised was foiled completely by the blush on her cheeks as the cowboy winked at her.

"A pity Professor Sprout isn't here," Harry continued. "Because that bag contains Miraculum Weed. It is abundant in the Mirror Realm, and I happen to know about its qualities. I don't know if this little fact is known to any of you, but Wolfsbane Potion is more of a rediscovery than a genuine discovery."

"I know about the Egyptian scrolls, Potter, and I know about the significance of Miraculum Weed."

"What are you talking about, Severus?" McGonagall asked.

"Potter is right. Wolfsbane Potion was invented millennia ago. But the scrolls with the brewing procedures were stolen in the dark ages. I believe the Order of Illumination recovered them... However, no potions master bothered to brew it, assuming that it wouldn't work without Miraculum Weed. In fact, they'd stopped brewing it long before the scrolls were stolen, because Miraculum Weed no longer grew anywhere. It had become extinct."

"Actually, Merlin said that Miraculum Weed used to grow on a wizarding island between Britain and Scandinavia in his time, which is quite some time after the weed was supposed to have gone extinct," Harry said. "I assume he meant Azkaban. But nothing grows there now. Anyway, the plants I have with me now have been carefully picked, and we should be able to replant them."

"Well, this means that there will be far fewer new werewolves, because with the addition of Miraculum Weed... the effects of the bite can be cured... provided that the potion is administered before the next full moon... Sorry, Remus!" Snape smirked.

"Thank you, Harry!" Chubb said as he pushed past Hermione to vigorously shake Harry's hand. "I'm sure I'll have a captive audience next year!" He hurried out of the ward, and the rest of the teachers followed, bidding the Rangers farewell.

Hermione sat down next to Harry. "Don't blame yourself for not listening to those caretakers." She had seen the look in his eyes when he'd told them about that. He felt responsible for all the death the Demon had caused.

"I'm not. But I can't help how I feel."

"Shall we go to the Citadel now?" Faust asked. "The cruiser has been sufficiently repaired, and we are ready to leave."

Harry looked at Pecos Bill. "I need you to come to Concordia. There are some things that the Rangers have to know... that ought to stay under wraps."

"Like what?" Hermione frowned.

"The location of the Portal that Bill took to get to the Mirror Realm. It's still accessible. But we don't want people to go there at will to plunder the Mirror Realm, so we have to keep that one a secret. Besides, it's dangerous there. But I was thinking about scheduling in a few expeditions a month or so before full solar eclipses... to get more Miraculum Weed in case these plants don't take root."

Hermione saw the merit in that. "I'd like to go there some day."

Harry stood up. "Like I said, it's a dangerous place."

"I can take care of myself!"

Harry chuckled. "I know that." His face shone with happiness. "You know what?"

"What?"

"I just realised that you and the Weasleys have forgiven me for what I did to Ron."

Galatea giggled, and Hermione followed suit.

"What?"

"You just realised it?"

Harry shrugged. "I had a lot of things on my mind. I didn't have time to realise it before now."

The all followed Faust out of the hospital ward, and soon they were all aboard the cruiser. To Harry's surprise, Charlie too was on board, his arms around a tall and beautiful woman.



Hermione saw him staring. "Harry... there are a couple of things you need to know. A lot has happened in your absence."

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Harry's mind was swimming in all the information Hermione had given him. Yes, a lot of things had happened in his absence.

Hermione had joined the Order of Illumination, as would Ron in all likelihood. Then there was the discovery of Wolfe's family tree. "So Wolfe is actually Commander Ironheart's grandson... and that woman is his sister, Ironheart's granddaughter, and she has a child with Charlie?"

"That about sums it up." Hermione nodded. "I feel really stupid that I didn't notice. I mean, they look so much alike... same looks...!"

Harry shrugged. He had never noticed, but he'd never seen Ironheart and Wolfe together either. "Well, I guess you'd need to be a woman to notice. On another note, you said that Wolfe rescued Ginny?"

Hermione looked down at the floor. "Yeah."

Harry noticed her reluctance to discuss this particular issue, although he had no idea why. "What's wrong?"

Hermione looked him in the eyes. "Harry...you'll probably become very angry after I've had my say, but I want you to promise me not to lose control, okay?"

The fact that Hermione thought he'd lose control hurt a bit. But he understood her concern. "Is it that bad?"

"The way I understand it, it was Wolfe who'd allowed Malfoy to take Ginny in the first place." She paused to gauge Harry's reaction.

"Why?"

"I'm not trying to excuse Max's behaviour. But you need to know the whole story about him. I'm sure you know about some of his past, and the problems that it causes in his behaviour?"

In hushed tones, Hermione explained how Wolfe had been raised to become a weapon by his great-grandfather, and the impact his upbringing had on his psyche. "But he's getting better. He changed a lot after I befriended him, and he and Galatea got together. But his problems are too deeply rooted for us to expect them to vanish within a few months. I guess his urge to avenge the death of his family is still too great.

"I spoke to Ginny while you were asleep. She's the one who told me about his motivations, and she forgave him. Can't you forgive him as well?"

Harry was confused. Why was Hermione defending Wolfe like that? "How do you feel about Wolfe?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Honestly, Harry! You're just like Ron. Max and I are just friends."

"You're on first name terms with him."

"So is Galatea."

"But she's been chasing him for two years!"

"And for a whole year he's been loving her right back. But he didn't tell her because he wanted to keep her away from himself, so as not to endanger her. Sound familiar?" Hermione smirked.

Harry blushed. That's what he'd done with Ginny. "So...you don't fancy him?"

"I love Ron!"

Harry noticed the evasive answer and smiled. "You didn't answer my question!"

Honestly...you're worse than Ron is! He's a very handsome man, and I'd be lying if I said I've never been attracted to him. But that's when Ron and I were still apart," she added with a blush.

"You and Ron broke up? Why?"

"Over you. It took him a bit longer to realise that you weren't evil."

Harry felt queasy. He'd nearly broken up his friends.

"Don't you dare feel responsible, Harry Potter!" Hermione warned, reading his expression correctly.

"Sorry, old habits die hard. And I think I'll forgive Wolfe. My desire for revenge made me lose control and curse Ron, so I can imagine Wolfe's situation a bit, even though his problems run much deeper. And I know how it feels when your friends turn their backs on you. But... if he ever does something like this again... I'll kill him."

Hermione smiled. "That's what Ron said."

Harry couldn't prevent his mouth from falling open in astonishment. "Ron forgave him too?"

"Spending time with the Rangers seems to have a positive effect on him."

"Wow... that's..."

"Isn't it?" Hermione grinned.

\*

The journey took eight more hours, in which Harry and Pecos Bill had been forced to tell the stories about the Mirror Realm over and over again. He was glad when they finally touched down inside the hangar bay under the Citadel. At least they'd leave him alone for a while, even if it was only temporary. He knew he'd have to re-tell the story again some time soon.

Part of the hull split open to form a ramp, allowing the Rangers to quickly disembark. Harry and Hermione waited for everyone to get off before they walked down the ramp. A redheaded blur met them halfway up the ramp. It smacked into Harry, and he suddenly found surprisingly strong arms wrapped around him in a tight embrace. Bright brown eyes danced less than a couple of inches from his own.

He felt his face go warm. "Ginny...!" That was all Harry could manage to utter. It came out as a whisper, and he wanted to say so much more, but he just couldn't find the right words. Being in her presence was so intoxicating that it prevented him from thinking clearly.

"Harry," she whispered, as her perfect lips curved up to form a beautiful smile. "Where were we?"

Harry looked around and saw that all eyes were on them. He blushed. "Would you mind waiting until we have some privacy? Or maybe we should sell tickets to the audience," he said loudly enough for everyone to hear, causing the Rangers to get moving again

Ginny glanced around. "I don't care...oh..."

Harry followed her gaze and saw Galatea whispering to Wolfe. She looked livid, and after a brief exchange of words she removed a necklace and threw it into Wolfe's chest. She turned on her heel and strode out of the bay.

The stricken look on Wolfe's face was quickly replaced by the cool expression he always wore, as he smoothly retrieved the necklace and pocketed it. Then he too left the bay in a hurry.

"I don't think Galatea was as forgiving as we were." Harry frowned. "I'm sure they'll work it out though." His gaze fell on Ron and Hermione, who were locked in a passionate embrace. "Don't they ever come up for air?"

Ginny grabbed the back of his head and turned it so he was looking at her. "Forget about them." She brushed the fringe of hair off his face, leaving an electric tingle where her hands had traced over his skin.

When Harry reached up to cup her face with his hand he found it trembling. It was a strange sensation. He'd known Ginny forever, and it didn't make sense that she made him feel this nervous.

She took his trembling hand in hers and interlaced her fingers with his. Her hand warmed his hand, which was incredibly cold for some reason. Her touch made him feel invincibly strong and helplessly weak at the same time.

Everything else around them ceased to exist as her bright brown eyes drew him in. He lowered his face as she inched hers upwards, and their lips brushed together. Her touch had been electrifying, but insignificant compared the feeling of her lips on his.

He didn't dare to do anything, afraid that she might vanish, leaving him with empty arms... something that had happened so often in the nightmares that had haunted him for two long years. But Ginny didn't vanish, instead she pressed their lips closer together and relaxed into the kiss.

Harry felt a strange wave of energy course through his body. It made him feel warm, and he was dimly aware of his hair standing on end. He could no longer tell where he ended and Ginny began. Never had he felt so close to anyone else, even in the most intimate of connections. His arms encircled her waist and pulled her closer... her arms settled comfortably around his neck. He didn't want to break the kiss, but he had to. The kiss had to end, like life inevitably had to end. But he took comfort in the fact that he could kiss her again... and he would.

When he broke the kiss, it felt like the end of a wild Portkey journey. He thought he felt his feet hit the floor, and he barely managed to remain standing, since he felt like he'd been hit with the Jelly-legs jinx. Ginny seemed to have the same problem, and was clinging to him tightly for support. They had leaned onto one another, each holding the other upright.

His vision cleared and he looked down into Ginny's eyes. He'd drowned in those eyes just moments ago, and the man he used to be

was dead. He was someone else...someone much stronger. So that was what a first kiss was supposed to feel like!

"Wow!"

Harry looked at the source of the exclamation, and saw Ron and Hermione clinging to each other for dear life.

"Harry..." Hermione squeaked. "You...you..."

"You were glowing...just like when you woke up to fight the Demon. And your hair was standing up again...and your glow surrounded Ginny too!"

"And you were floating an inch off the ground!" Hermione added, her eyes as round as saucers. "What happened to you?"

"Ginny," Harry answered simply. "Ginny kissed me."

"Ginny..." Ron repeated numbly. "Well, I guess I'm happy for you both... but Harry, most powerful wizard or not, if you ever hurt my little sister, I'll hunt you down and kill you."

Harry smiled. "Empty threat. I'm sure Ginny would kill me before you got the chance."

"You're right!" Ron nodded, smiling. He walked over to Harry, threw his arm around him and slapped his back. "It's good to have you back!"

"It's good to be back."

Ron's mouth opened and closed as he searched for the right words. "Harry, I'm sorry I..."

"Never mind!" Harry said. He didn't need to hear the apology.

"No...I need to say this!"

"It's okay, I already know what you're going to say."

"Still, I'm really sorry for all the grief I've caused you. I really blew things out of proportion."

"No, you didn't...I..."

"Can't you just accept the damned apology?" Ron said hotly.

Harry grinned sheepishly. "All right then, apology accepted."

"Now give each other a hug!" Ginny commanded.

Harry looked at Ron, and Ron shrugged. They gave each other the briefest of hugs, causing Hermione to snort. "You call that a hug? You're best friends, and yet you're too macho to hug each other properly?"

"Hey, that's got nothing to do with it." Ron said defensively. "Harry knows I meant what I said, and besides, you can't expect us to hug properly with you two looking on. That's sacred male bonding, and we don't do that in front of women!"

"Whatever you say, Ron." Ginny chuckled.

"Let's get cleaned up!" Hermione suggested. "Then we can go to the mess hall and celebrate. We can't go out into town yet, because the news that the Demon wasn't really you hasn't reached everyone yet. You might cause some consternation."

"That's an understatement." Ron laughed, and his face lit up. "Oi, guess what Ginny did to Malfoy?"

Harry looked at Ginny expectantly, and Ginny rolled her eyes. "Oh, Ron gets a real kick out of it. I don't see what the big deal is, though."

"She stabbed him in the nuts, mate! She ended the Malfoy line!"

Harry blinked. Did Ginny stab someone in the privates? "I'll have to remember not to get you hacked off with me."

"I would never do that to you... Harry. Unless you do something that really hurts my feelings!" she added with a wicked grin.

Hermione and Ron laughed heartily at Harry's discomfort.

"Don't worry, mate. She won't stab you until after you've had kids!"

Ginny blushed. "You are getting way ahead of things, Ron."

"What?" Ron asked innocently. "Don't you want to have Harry's babies? Afraid that your kids will inherit his scruffy hair?"

"Maybe I should extend my stabbing urges to bovine brothers!" Ginny growled, and Ron shut up.

"Be nice to your brother, Ginny. He's of no use to me if you go through with it."

Ron pretended to be hurt. "Is that all I am to you?"

"No, dear. I love you for your astonishing intellect and wit," Hermione teased.

"Can we please take this conversation out of the gutter?" Harry asked. "I'm sure there's other stuff we can talk about."

"Harry's right," Ginny said, linking her arm through his. "I'd like to see Charlie meet Charlie Jr. And I also want some answers on how exactly he met Jasmine." She looked at Ron. "Did you tell Mum about that, by the way?"

"About Charlie Jr? Yep, I did. I bet she's bothering Percy to arrange for her to come to Concordia without the six-month waiting period."

"Why can't they just go to England?" Hermione asked.

"Commander Ironheart doesn't think it's safe for Jasmine and Charlie to live anywhere other than Concordia. He's already found a house for them too. It's a house right next to Nathan and Helga's."



"No doubt so they can keep an eye on her." Hermione nodded.

This was all going too fast for Harry to follow. "Hold on, Nathan Kelly and Helga Olsen are an item?"

"I'll take you to see Serafina Esposito." Hermione smiled. "You don't know her, but she came back out of retirement shortly after you disappeared. She's the biggest gossip in the Citadel, and I'm sure she'd love to inform you on all the things that have happened while you were away."

"Big gossip, eh?"

"It'll be like talking to Lavender."

"Oh, joy!" Harry sighed.

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A/N: Thank Ashwinder, my beta, for the H/G kiss. My kissing scene was very short and described in a single sentence. But Ashwinder (R&R her sequel to Ginny's Gift) trashed it, cracked her whip and told me try again.

Let me know what you think. :-)

Disclaimer: The bit at the very end was borrowed and adapted from 40 Days and 40 Nights. I may have forgotten to disclaim a few things throughout the story, but it wasn't intentional.

## Epilogue

The next month passed in a flurry of activity. Hermione had been assigned to plan an expedition into the Mirror Realm in mid-November 2002, so they could Apparate out on December fourth, the date of the next total eclipse. Even though Miraculum Weed had taken root quite well in a secluded part of the Concordian Botanical Gardens, it had been the herb master's advice to get more plants, to keep the stock plants from interbreeding and becoming weak.

Even though the expedition was over a year away, Hermione had been busy with some preliminary planning. She'd decided that the expedition required the most powerful wizards and witches to accompany a team of researchers to protect them with wand-less magic, since wands almost never worked in the Mirror Realm. This meant that Wolfe and Harry would probably be drafted when the time came to go... and they'd even convinced Pecos Bill to stick around long enough to be their guide.

The American cowboy wizard, for his part, had been approached by all the members of the Concordian press once his identity had been verified. With Hermione and Harry's help, Padma had got the exclusive interview.

Padma had also frequently visited Galatea for counselling and had been doing slightly better, though it would obviously still take quite some time for her emotional wounds to heal.

Hermione thought Galatea needed some counselling herself, since she still refused to talk to Max after a full month. He'd been taken off the active duty roster, and he'd been forced to relax, but it only made things worse. Max had lost weight, and he had an air of defeat about him. His time off was doing more harm than good, since he couldn't even work to keep his mind off things, like he used to do.

Hermione looked up from her book to see Galatea pacing around. They were in the lavishly decorated top floor chambers of the town house. This was a girls-only area, protected by wards to keep men out. "Honestly, what are you so worried about? You don't care about him anymore, right? Besides, you told Heidi it was okay for her to go out with him."

Galatea bit her fingernails. "But I didn't mean it."

"Well, it's your own fault. I told you that you were in heavy denial. If Max and Heidi hit it off, you can't interfere. You've distanced yourself from Max," Hermione said as she ducked behind her book to hide her smile. There was no way that that would happen, but she enjoyed torturing Galatea anyway. Even though the part-Veela was angry with Max, it was obvious that she still loved him.

"So it's true," Gudrun said, as she came in and launched herself onto a couch. "You actually allowed Heidi to go out with your boyfriend?"

"He is not my boyfriend."

"If you say so." Gudrun shrugged. "So I guess you won't object if I have a go at him in case he manages to resist Heidi's charms."

Hermione peered over her book to see Galatea's reaction. She was nervously twisting a handkerchief.

Hermione caught Gudrun's mischievous glance. While it was no secret that Gudrun would probably try to get Max into bed given half a chance, Hermione knew she wouldn't do so knowing that Galatea was still in love with him. Besides, Max was still angry with Gudrun for having circulated footage of him dropping his trousers around the Citadel. Apparently she'd recorded everything when Commander Ironheart was dressing him down.

"Any news?" Hermione asked Gudrun.

"Actually, I happen to have some very interesting news. Your future sister-in-law was asked to try out for the Order."

Hermione dropped her book in her lap. "Seriously?"

Gudrun nodded. "She's got a lot of talent in the area of Magical Artificing. I took her through the basics myself. She's a really bright kid... reminds me of me when I was her age. Anyway, that, coupled with her medical training, it would make her a very versatile Ranger. She'd be able to maintain equipment as well as Rangers." She grinned. "And she's proven that she can handle herself in a fight... cut down the opposition! She'll start to train with the newest load of recruits."

Hermione smiled. A major point of concern of Harry's had been the time he'd have had to spend away from Ginny. This would make things easier for them to establish a relationship. They'd spent as much time together as possible over the last month, getting reacquainted with one another.

The night before, on Harry's birthday, all the Seventh Class Rangers had been promoted to Sixth Class, with the exception of Harry, whose spectacular actions and growth in skill had made Faust and Ironheart decide to let him skip Sixth Class entirely. Hermione had been happy for him, but she was also concerned, for she knew this meant that Harry would be sent on much more dangerous missions.

Ginny chose that moment to walk in. "Hello, girls!"

"Hi, Ginny. I thought you'd be with Harry."

"They dragged him off to the Quidditch pitch." Ginny sighed. "Couldn't miss their star Seeker."

The heavy front door downstairs slammed shut. And someone stomped up the stairs.

"Heidi?" Hermione called.

"Yes!" the Austrian witch replied.

"How was your date with Max?"

"Depressing! He kept asking about Galatea."

Galatea's face lit up. "I have to go!" she said before hurrying out of the lounge and down the stairs.

They waited for Galatea to leave the house, and Heidi came up the stairs shortly after. "Well girls, did our plan work?"

"Like a charm!" Gudrun grinned. "Nothing more satisfying than using reverse psychology on a psychologist."

"Wait...you three set this up?" Ginny asked, looking baffled.

"We sure did. We got tired of waiting around for Tea to come to her senses, so we gave her a push in the right direction by pretending to be interested in Wolfe ourselves. We appealed to her competitive instincts."

"It a good thing Wolfe rejected me though." Heidi sighed. "I don't know if I could have resisted if he had actually shown interest in me. He's just so..."

"Still craving things you can't have, eh Heidi?" Ginny sneered. "I thought you'd learned your lesson."

Hermione winced. Here we go again. For some odd reason, Ginny and Heidi could not get along. Hermione thought it was a combination of several things. Ginny still hadn't forgiven Heidi for the remark she'd made on the day Hermione left for Concordia. Heidi, for her part, was obviously resentful of Ginny for being the unchallenged object of Harry's affection. Strangely enough, Ginny herself didn't fully believe this, and hence she felt threatened by Heidi, who'd been very friendly with Harry at their joint birthday party the previous evening.

"Funny," Heidi said coolly. "Harry's never complained about my competence. Who knows...Virginia...if you turn out to be a disappointment..."

"Let me remind you ladies that all kitty-cats will be thrown out of the window by yours truly...so cease and desist!" Gudrun warned, nipping the impending catfight in the bud.

Ginny looked just about ready to hex Heidi, but like everybody else, she knew not to cross Gudrun, who was possibly even more of a spitfire.

"Come on, Heidi," Gudrun said, leading Heidi by the arm. "Plenty of willing males out there. They're not as perfect as we are, but we'll have to make do. Later, girls," she called to Hermione and Ginny, leaving them by themselves.

Ginny was still shaking with anger after they'd left. "Oooh! I don't know what Harry saw in her."

"You!" Hermione said simply.

"I'm not sure if that's an insult or a compliment."

Hermione sighed. "You have more in common with Heidi than you think. It's part of the reason you're not getting along."

"I have nothing in common with her...she's a snob!"

"Ginny...I shudder to think how much of a bitch you'd have been if your father had been a rich wizard. I'm sure he would have spoiled you rotten!" Hermione said sternly. "I think you should make more of an effort to get along with Heidi. You know she didn't try to steal Harry away from you. In fact, I'm glad she was there for him when we weren't!"

"She was just using his loneliness."

"You shouldn't vilify Heidi that way. She does care about Harry..." She paused as she saw Ginny's features draw into a scowl. "And she knows she's out of the picture!"

"I hate it when you're right." Ginny pouted, and she eyed Hermione curiously. "You really think I would have been a bitch?"

"Well, I have been wrong before..."

Ginny threw a pillow at her. "Gee, you're such a good friend!"

Hermione blocked the pillow with her book. "So what did Harry and Ron have to say about your becoming a Ranger?"

"Both were happy and worried." Ginny looked at her questioningly. "What about you? Are you worried about me?"

"You're like my own little sister...I'll always worry about you. Just don't do anything foolishly reckless, like Max and Harry, and you'll be fine."

"Your confidence warms my heart!" Ginny said with a mock-scowl, and she threw a pillow at Hermione.

"Good advice never hurt anyone," Hermione said. "Oh, would you like to live here? Ron and I will be moving to the third level in August. We need a place of our own."

"Really, where are you going to live?"

"In the Western Quadrant, right across from Jasmine and Charlie. We've gone down to see it this morning. You can see the Quidditch pitches from our attic." Hermione sighed. "That's why Ron wants the master bedroom in the attic."

"That's Ron for you! Just be sure to put your foot down when it comes to decoration, or you'll be sleeping with the Cannons!"

Hermione gave Ginny a rueful grin. "You're right. But what about you and Harry? I thought you'd be moving in together soon."

"We both have a bunch of things to work out. We'll have rooms in the Citadel... of course, I could come and live here... this place is brilliant."

"If you manage to get along with Heidi."

Ginny blushed. "As I was saying, Harry needs to settle back into normal life. His time in the Mirror Realm left its marks, and people still stare at him in the city. He told me that one of the things he liked best about Concordia was his anonymity. And last week, there was this strange witch who came up to Harry and hugged him. Turns out she was bitten by a werewolf on July fifth, but thanks to Harry she's cured..."

"You're giving him time to get used to all the changes." Hermione nodded. Through Padma and the Concordian Chronicle, the Concordians had learned about the truth. While Harry had been able to live in relative anonymity before, he was a huge celebrity even in Concordia, now.

"That's not all. Harry seems to be... holding back." Ginny bit her lip and looked at Hermione uncertainly. "I guess he really needs the time... but sometimes it makes me think..." She paused, looking for a way to express her feelings. "You'd think that he'd know that I'm always there for him. I don't know why he's holding back."

"Just be there for him. He'll open up when he's ready."

"I guess." Ginny sighed. "Oh, and he asked me to ask you where his Invisibility Cloak is?"

Hermione blushed. She'd forgotten all about that. While Harry had been presumed dead, Hermione had been entrusted with his personal belongings. She'd put everything into storage because she hadn't had the heart to divide it up. A good thing too, in retrospect. But she'd kept his cloak as a memento.

She hoisted herself out of her armchair. "I still have that. Let's return it to him. Maybe we can drag the boys away from the Quidditch pitch to accompany us to the Fairy Light show tonight."

Ginny snorted. "That won't work!"

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure." Hermione smirked. "We'll just use our feminine wiles to coerce them."



"Coerce?" Ginny frowned.

Hermione took Ginny by the arm and guided her out of the lounge.  
"Ginny, I think it's time to teach you in the ways of the man, it's time to teach you about The Power. You see...women have The Power...and it's all part of The System..."

\*\*\*

Fin

Please read

A/N: First and foremost I'd like to thank all of my reviewers, especially the ones who reviewed at the very beginning. Your support was crucial.

My betas also deserve credit for most of this story's quality. Ashwinder is sort of my mentor, and Christine...well, lets just say that I'd marry Christine if she weren't a perfect stranger known only through e-mail contact and already had a boyfriend and...But I digress.

A special place in this Oscar speech is also reserved for Imogen and Ruskbyte. Your encouragement meant a lot to me, and I thank you.

Keep a lookout for the sequel to this story...Mind War.

Cygnus Crux